

The man on the bridge

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by [boopboop](#)

Summary

Steve Rogers turning up at Tony's door in the middle of the night might be a bit out of character, but it's not completely out of the realm of possibility. Stranger things have happened.

Steve Rogers turning up at Tony's door with an amnesiac assassin - who may or may not have some of Tony's personally designed hardware attached where his arm should be - well that's just far too interesting to turn away, even if Tony is trying to avoid all things S.H.I.E.L.D these days.

Notes

I have too many Bucky and Steve feels to be contained. I'm not sure how Tony got involved but then I don't think he knows either.

Chapter 1

All rich people have a house in the Hamptons. There's some kind of law about it. A house in the Hamptons, a yacht and a supermodel on speed dial. Tony lost the yacht over an F1 wager some months back and is fairly sure JARVIS has deleted Alessandra's cell number on Pepper's orders, but the house he still owns. Back B.A, he's thrown some pretty - okay, exceedingly - spectacular parties in the big estate but since Afghanistan, since Iron Man, it largely stands unoccupied.

This is, in fact, the first time he's been back in maybe three or four years, so he's not entirely unsurprised when the doorbell chimes at ten pm on his second night. Word travels fast in this part of the world and he has a lot of very nosey, very bored neighbors.

What does surprise him is the appearance of one Captain Steve Rogers waiting patiently on his porch. They might have saved the world together, but you could hardly call him and Rogers BFF. He likes Steve, of course he does, but then you'd need to be some kind of villainous monster to not. It's just...the guy's just too wound up, too serious, too...well he's just *too*, and Tony might be riding the redemption wagon and trying to be a better person, but he isn't running for sainthood. Winding Rogers up is A: fun and B: far too easy. He's fairly sure Steve actively encourages it sometimes.

"Oh Captain, my Captain!" Tony is still surprisingly glad to see him though. He's been thinking for some time that maybe there should be some kind of Avengers reunion - minus the aliens, naturally. He's come across Fury a few times since he supposedly 'died', and technically Hill works for him now. He knows he spotted Thor in England and there had been the whole 'surprise, we're a front for an evil nazi sect' thing, but on the whole he's not had much to do with S.H.I.E.L.D. In hindsight that might be a good thing, what them apparently wanting him dead. Rogers was pretty heavily involved with that shitstorm and Tony is a little - and really, only a very little - relieved to see him in one piece. "What brings you to my humble abode?"

"Mr Stark," Rogers starts, making Tony's eyebrow raise. Steve's always been a Boy Scout but this is a whole new level of polite. "Can we come in?" He sounds nervous, but not hesitant, like he's afraid Tony will say no, but it's not enough to keep him from asking.

It's then Tony catches up on the 'we'. It looks like Rogers is alone on the porch, but at the request a figure moves in the shadows and steps out into the light. He's surprised no one has called the cops, because the man at Rogers' side practically has the word FELON stamped on his pale forehead. His eyes flicker repeatedly over to Rogers, almost as if he is nervous, but his expression is utterly flat. He holds his left arm stiffly against his side.

Tony might get a little excited, because this is *so* unlike Rogers, but he can't help but catch the way Steve's hands clench and his shoulders angle ever-so-slightly towards the strange man at his side. He's giving off a protective vibe that's so intense, so fierce, that it almost feels aggressive, and damn it if that doesn't pique Tony's interest.

He steps back and holds out his arm in welcome. "Mi casa, su casa!"

Rogers turns back to his companion. "It's okay. We'll be safe here." Tony's almost a little touched that Rogers thinks so, but he's still too curious to let his mind wander far off track.

Mr Tall, Dark and Mysterious gives Rogers another probing glance, then steps into the house where the light falls on him completely and makes him look even more out of place in his shabby leather jacket and hoodie. He's got a couple of weeks worth of beard on his pale, sunken face and

that doesn't help. He looks closer to Tony's size than Steve's but it won't be the end of the world if Tony doesn't have anything that fits the guy. That's why the good lord invented overnight shipping.

He closes the door after Steve, who turns and asks, "Do you have a first aid kit?" There's a small sound from his friend and Steve's expression becomes stern. "You need medical attention."

It looks like he will, but Tony steps in. "Are you bleeding?" He asks Steve's friend. The glare he gets in response is positively glacial. "I'm taking that as a yes. Which, okay, house rule number one, no bleeding. It's a thing. Also, the rug you're standing on is older than Rogers, if you can believe it, so just...no. And I just ate. I have a thing about house guests bleeding within twenty minutes of a meal. Now," he guides them up the stairs to the third floor and down the hallway. Tony's a lot of things, but he's also learned to be prepared. He doesn't have so much of a First Aid kit as he does a small surgery. It's an installment he's had added to all the properties he owns. "Do you have a name, or should I just call you Morrissey?"

He half expects a blank look from Rogers, or maybe some of that childlike enthusiasm he gets when he actually knows a pop culture reference. He doesn't expect the pained, sorrowful glance Steve gives his companion. "Tony," Steve says, more serious than ever, "this is Bucky."

He says that like it has some meaning, and in a second, when his brain fills in the blanks, Tony realizes it does.

"Bucky as in your best friend who died like seventy years ago? That Bucky?" Tony asks, eyes wide. Now he thinks about it he can recall some of the old pictures his dad had kept around in his office, some of Steve and him, some of Steve and a group of men, one who always stood at his side, his laugh wide and genuine. He doesn't feel bad for not putting the two together right away. It is hard to imagine the man walking beside him as ever having smiled in his life. "Okay then, this just became a far more interesting way to spend my evening than watching Jersey Shores reruns. Shall we?" He opens the door to the small medical room and Barnes tensed, refusing to step over the threshold.

"It's okay," Steve pushes Tony aside and lays a hand on Barnes' back. "It's not like there. I'll be with you the whole time. Tony's a friend. He won't hurt you."

Barnes doesn't look at him. He stares into the middle of the room, his body tense and unmoving. Tony gets the feeling that they'll stand there as long as it takes Barnes to work up the courage to cross the threshold. He finds it a whole lot easier to be patient than he would have once done. He thanks Pepper for that. Tact is never going to be his middle name, not until he changes his last name to -Less, but Pepper's always been perfect, actually perfect, at handling Tony's PTSD and it doesn't really take one to know one to see that Barnes is giving off some serious trauma vibes. So he waits and doesn't say anything as he watches Captain America talk a missing WWII war hero into his small, clean, non-intimidating room.

Eventually Barnes steps inside, but none of the tension leaves Steve's shoulders. Barnes is still looking at the space like it's a torture he's resigned to endure and Tony can't decide if he's impressed by the guy's courage or a little horrified by it. Steve hovers close by like an overprotective, six-foot-two super soldier mother hen, and there's no doubt a joke in there somewhere, but Barnes has taken his shirt off, and Tony's suddenly really distracted by the metal fucking *arm* that's fused to his torso. Also, bullet wounds. But mostly the arm, because that's some seriously impressive shit.

Steve makes a clucking sound, "You never told me you were hit that bad!" He said, looking both worried and offended. There's a roadmap of scars, pale against his equally pallid skin, that makes

Tony think 'soldier'. It fits with the general air of danger Barnes gives off, and would have clued Tony in even if he hadn't known anything about him.

Barnes looks at him strangely. "It'll heal." Those are the first words he says, and it's obvious he doesn't speak all that often.

"That's not the point!" Steve protests. "I'd never have pushed us as hard if I'd known."

"Where were you?" Tony asks, dragging his attention away from the prosthetic arm to catalogue the requirements he'll need to patch Barnes up. He's had a lot of experience in battlefield triage the last few years.

"Tallahassee." Rogers says absently. His gaze has moved from the bullet wounds - one skimming the side of Barnes ribs, the other his right shoulder - to the seam of metal and flesh. He looks, briefly, like he wants to cry, and Tony'll go out on a limb and say that maybe the cool cybernetic arm might not have been Barnes' idea.

"Interesting part of the world," Tony said, fetching a clean needle and several vials. "Good shrimp. Now I'm taking some blood so I can check you're not going die of infection or go moldy or whatever so please don't kill me with your Go-Go-Gadget arm... and we're done." He beams, having slid the needle into Barnes' living arms and collected the samples he needs before Barnes can stop staring at him like he's crazy. "JARVIS?"

"Yes sir?"

Barnes jerks in surprise at the sudden voice in the room.

"Easy Rick Allen," Tony soothes, "JARVIS, run our new friend's samples, check for infection, anything we need to worry about...the usual stuff." He keeps his orders vague, knowing JARVIS will run a full work up, and turns back to Barnes, "You know...drummer...one arm? Seriously Rogers, you've not introduced him to Def Leppard yet?"

"We've been a little busy." Rogers says testily.

"I can see that." Tony says, now taking a look at the open wounds. They seem to be healing well on their own. "How old are these?"

Steve looks at Barnes, waiting for an answer. Reluctantly, Barnes responds, "Seventeen hours, I suppose."

Tony whistles. That's some pretty impressive healing on wounds so fresh. "Well, the good news is you're not about to bleed to death."

"And the bad?" Rogers asks worriedly.

"Well I'm guessing you didn't remove the bullet?" Tony says, shooting Barnes a look that, for him at least, is seriously sympathetic.

Rogers is instantly on the defensive. "I'm not letting you perform amateur surgery on my best friend!"

"Then you should have knocked on someone else's door, shouldn't you?" Tony says crossly. "Why didn't you, by the way?" It feels a little bit petty, glaring at each other over Barnes, who doesn't seem to know where he stands. Tony can't help it. Steve pushes all his buttons.

“Sir?” JARVIS calls.

“Yeah buddy?”

“*Mr Fury is on the line.*”

“Tell him I’m skiing.” Tony responds, “You want drugs for this? I’ve got some wicked strong oxycodone somewhere?” He asks Barnes, who shakes his head.

“Bucky...” Steve tries, giving up when Barnes shakes his head again.

“Sir, *Mr Fury asks me to remind you that there are no mountains in this area.*” JARVIS pipes up.

“Snorkling?” Tony tries.

“*It is ten fifteen at night, sir.*”

“Moonlight snorkeling a thing.” Tony protests, “I’m fairly sure it’s a thing. It’s a thing, right? Wait, why am I asking you?” He doesn’t give Steve a chance to answer. “Tell him I’ll call him back at some point this year.” He tells JARVIS.

“*Very good, sir.*”

“Fury?” He and Steve both look down at Barnes, “is he the one I shot?”

“You shot Fury?” Tony asks, stunned. That’s a little terrifying...and a little impressive. Let’s face it, there’s a long list of people who’d happily want to shoot the meddling bastard, but probably not all that many with the balls to actually do it.

“Do you remember?” Steve asks, hopeful.

Barnes shakes his head. “You told me.”

For a second, Rogers looks disappointed, but it passes quickly.

“That’s okay.” Steve promises. “Let’s just dig this bullet out, yeah?”

“It’ll be fun.” Tony promises. “Like Operation. The game, not the thing. You sure you don’t want drugs?”

“Stark...” Steve warns.

“Keep your tights on, Princess.” Tony waves away his worry. “I’ve done this loads of times. Like, twice. In low lighting, so...this’ll be ten times better.” It’s not as much fun winding Steve up when Barnes doesn’t so much as twitch in reaction. “I’ll be quick as a flash,” Tony promises, “so just... lay back and think of England. Or, what...Brooklyn, right?” He pushes Barnes back gently so he can get a better angle and suddenly has to deal with the crushing grip of that metal hand around his throat.

“Bucky, no!” Steve cries, wrestling against Barnes’ grip. Tony’s grateful, or he would be if he could still breathe. It’s probably only seconds before he’s dropped, hitting his knees and sucking in lungfuls of sweet, beautiful oxygen, but it feels a whole lot longer.

“Mean grip.” He chokes, eying that arm suspiciously. There’s something about it that doesn’t sit right with him. The design is familiar. Too familiar. He needs to get a better look, to study it, but that’s not going to happen until Barnes calms down, and while drugging him seems like the most

logical answer, Tony's not putting any chemicals into that body until he knows exactly what he's dealing with. For all he knows Barnes might share Rogers' insane metabolism.

"I...sorry?" Barnes says, but he's looking at Steve, not Tony and it sounds like he's trying the words on for size. Steve nods, small and pleased, and this time Barnes looks Tony in the eye when he repeats himself.

"No," Tony wheezes, "it's my bad. Let's just do this sitting up, yes? You want a soda?" Barnes frowns. "Right. Maybe not. Who shot you, anyway?"

He finds the infection in the first wound even before JARVIS completes the blood work up. He's not surprised. The bullets have torn through leather and cotton, both of which fester quickly in untreated wounds. Tony works as speedily and as gently as he can, locating the bullet quickly and cleaning the wound of contaminants. He opens the pockets of infection, yellow and green puss leaking from the edges of torn skin.

Barnes says nothing the whole time, his eyes fixed on Steve, who looks so pained it might as well be him that Tony's digging bullets out of. Neither of them answer his question.

"Okay Florence, bathe the wound." Tony orders, once he's as satisfied as he can be that he's drained the worst of the infection. Steve obeys orders, his hands gentle and careful as he tends to the first wound. The second is much easier to work with, the path of the bullet a deep but open gouge between Barnes' ribs. Tony'll have to order more food. Steve needs to eat a stupid amount and it looks like Barnes has missed more than one meal in the last few weeks.

Steve's just about finished bathing and wrapping the wound on Barnes' shoulder by the time Tony's done the same with the one on his side. They lean back, and he, at least, is exhausted. "You should probably get some sleep. I've got a guest room. Actually, I've got seven guest rooms, but the one down the hall is the best."

"I don't sleep." Barnes tells him in the same flat voice. Everything about him is that way, from his expressions to his words. It's more than a little weird, but Tony knows how to pick his battles.

"Whatever works for you." He shrugs. "What about you, Cap?" Steve shakes his head, still not tearing his eyes away from Barnes. "Right. Okay then. I've got two geriatric insomniacs in my house and wait... did you watch Star Wars yet?"

Steve frowns. "Is that the one where all the guys in the red shirts die?"

"That's Star Trek." Tony corrects. "Easy mistake. They're both rebooted by the same guy and let me tell you, JJ screws this up and I'm changing his name to Jar-Jar." Steve just shrugs helplessly. "Worry not. You, my metal armed friend, need to let my beautiful handiwork settle, and that means staying still. It also means I can make Rogers catch up on some of his pop-culture, but hey, you don't want Star Wars then how about something a little more from your time? I've got Jurassic Park around here somewhere."

Bucky looks at him briefly before back at Steve. "Did I ever shoot this one?" he asks.

"Sadly not." Steve sighs.

"Well that's rude. See if I share my popcorn with you now." Tony huffs.

"We'll live." Steve says dryly.

"Yes, thanks to me and my awesome triage skills. But no, seriously, you need to shower, Rogers,

and you need clothes that don't scream 'teenage degenerate'. So, let's reconvene in twenty, watch movies, and maybe you can explain how your dead friend is not dead and why you came to me of all people for help."

"And why we got shot at?" Steve adds wearily, clearly wanting to help Barnes stand but somehow managing to restrain himself.

Tony shrugs. "I've seen your people skills, Rogers. It was bound to happen eventually. Shall we?"

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony's the only one of them who actually watches the movie. Rogers watches Barnes and Barnes watches the spot on the wall directly in front of him. It's got to be a pretty fascinating bit of architecture because not once, from opening credits to the '*no actual dinosaurs were harmed in the making of this film*', does Barnes avert his gaze. It's the thing that's most creepy about him, and that's saying a lot.

On Tony's couch, in a pair of his sweats, bare toes poking out from beneath the hems, Barnes looks about as threatening as one of the expensive throw pillows he's leaning on. That's half the problem. Barnes looks harmless now, even with the gleam of his metal hand resting on his thigh. He's too still, too quiet, too calm to be a threat, and that's maybe what's most threatening of all. He's got Steve on edge and any man who can do that is worth treating with kid gloves, at least while he's in breaking distance of Tony's second favorite coffee table.

He knows for sure that neither of them are paying attention as they settle into the second movie. He's seen this film maybe a dozen times now and there are still parts that make him jump like a girl. Barnes and Rogers don't even twitch and Rogers can be a real jumpy guy sometimes, especially when he's on shore leave. All those war reflexes, Tony supposes. Hard to break free of.

Fury's tried calling twice more, despite the fact that it's now gone midnight. JARVIS has stopped asking him for excuses and comes up with some of his own, leaving Tony to study the two fossils on his couch. It's a little weird, knowing that they are both mid twenties and mid nineties all at once. Rogers seems to be getting his head around modern living steadily enough.

He's not sure how Barnes is adjusting, or has adjusted, whatever. There's lots Steve has yet to share, like the hows and the whys and the who's involved in bringing Barnes back from the dead. And he must have died. Even though Tony knows his own father was involved in the search and rescue effort, he's heard the story often enough. Barnes had fallen from that train, over six hundred feet down and traveling at over a hundred miles per hour. There's no way the math results in anything less than a human splat at the bottom of a cliff. Unless, of course, Barnes isn't human.

He can't imagine that conversation going well with Steve.

Half way through the second movie, JARVIS sends the workup of Bucky's blood to Tony's tablet. Tony eyes his houseguests - still staring at everything but the film- and figures they are distracted enough by their own drama for him to do some snooping.

The first thing he sees when he opens the file is proof that yes, he's a genius, because no, Barnes isn't human. Not any more. Tony doesn't really know if what he is makes him more than human, or less, but it sure as hell explains how he survived falling out of a speeding train. His metabolic rate is insane, his genetic profile a thing that makes Tony oh-so-briefly want to trade in the engineering and take up bio-chemistry on a full time basis. There is, he thinks absently, most likely the cure for all sorts of things floating around happily in Barnes' veins.

It's also vastly different from Steve's blood work up. Physically, Steve is perfection. Everything about him works exactly as it was designed to, and it works well. He's still very, very human, despite being so much more. What elevates him to more than what he was has clearly been crafted with finesse and care, with - if Tony indulges in a little romanticism long enough to admit it - love.

It's elegant, refined. It'd goddamn artistry, that's what it is.

Whatever has been done to Barnes is less a shining example of scientific brilliance, and more testimony to the results of brute force.

Anyone with half a brain can look at Steve's workup and see the purpose behind the design, the grace behind the power. He's crafted for war, but not at the expense of what makes him a man. With Barnes it looks like someone has tried to make him as dangerous as possible, as fast as possible, and they have ruthlessly stamped out anything superfluous to their needs along the way.

It's...well, Tony can abhor the method even if he begrudgingly admires the results.

He jerks up from his tablet when Rogers kicks his leg gently.

Barnes is sleeping - upright and in what has to be the most uncomfortable position ever - but he's actually out.

Tony jerks his head towards the kitchen and Steve follows silently. If Tony had been the type for blankets, he can imagine Rogers tucking Barnes under one, despite the risk to life and limb. Fortunately for them all, Tony hasn't owned a blanket since he was three.

"You got coffee?" Rogers asks as they step into the kitchen. From this angle, they can still just about see the back of Barnes' head through the doorway.

Tony makes them both a coffee from his stupidly overpriced and complicated machine. He needs every single one of his degrees to understand how the damn thing works. One of these days he'll strip the whole thing down and build it again from scratch, even if Pepper has threatened to cut him off.

Steve downs his in seconds. Tony makes him another. "You know, the world won't stop spinning if you get some shut-eye." He says sardonically. Steve ignores him but takes time with the second helping of caffeine. "How long's it been since you slept?"

"Doesn't matter." Steve says. "I can go a couple of weeks on catnaps."

"Good for you. What about Barnes?"

"I don't think he's slept properly since 1942." Steve sighs. "I've never been very good at this." Steve admits, staring into his coffee like it holds all the answers he's looking for.

"Dealing with friends coming back from the dead?" Tony asks, "because in our line of work buddy, you'd think you'd be used to it by now."

Steve shakes his head sharply. "No. Bucky."

"You're not very good at Bucky?" Tony frowns.

He can see Steve's mounting frustration with him and feels a little bad. Still, inappropriate humor is his thing, it's how he copes with weird events like the one unfolding in his barley used Hamptons summer house. It's no different from Bruce and his yoga, or Clint's snark, or Loki's occasional homicidal streaks. The last one, okay, not a great example of how best to deal with ones issues, but it always puts Tony's little quirks into perspective. He has yet to try his hand at world domination, which everyone should take as pretty much a win. His methods are less likely to get him killed at least. Mostly.

“Bucky, he...he solved the problems. He fixed things. I usually got us into trouble, but he always charmed us out of it again.” Steve confesses, his gaze in the past and his words muttered like they were things he’s wanted to say for a long time now. “I mean, sometimes we’d have to fight our way out. *He’d* have to fight, I was usually more a liability than anything else...” he trails off, half a smile on his face, clearly remembering something that had happened long before Tony was even born.

“So you needed him. I mean, not a fan of co-dependency - don’t let the thing with Pepper fool you-but...well, I get it.” Tony’s trying so hard not to be an asshole. He wants a medal, or a cookie, anything really.

“It wasn’t just that.” Steve admits. “He was always the one I looked up to. Bucky and I, we had nothing, growing up. Less than nothing, sometimes. That didn’t really matter to me. We had each other, that’s all that we needed. Even when he got shipped out and I went into the program, I mean I knew he was going to war. That a lot of guys, good guys, they never came back. I just,” Steve laughs a little, “He was Bucky, you know? He was always gonna be okay. Even when he went MIA I never really believed that I’d lose him.”

“Well I think we’ve got all the proof you need that he’s not exactly an easy guy to kill.” Tony says, trying to be helpful. From the flinch he catches on Steve’s jaw he knows he’s not been entirely successful. He doesn’t feel bad. Guys like Steve, like Barnes, guys with these kind of issues... you’ll step on a landmine with them eventually. There’s just too many, too well hidden, to avoid them all entirely. The best you can really hope for is containment.

“When I found him in that hell hole... Zola had tortured him. That was it, I guess.” Steve admits. “When I started to think that maybe he needed me as much as I did him. I know it was bad, I mean, I found him strapped to a gurney like a goddamn lab rat -“ Tony’s eyebrows raise at what has to be the first time Steve’s ever cussed in, if not history, then at least Tony’s hearing, “and I know he had nightmares, I mean, we all did but...” He trails off, his eyes flickering back towards the couch and the man sleeping upright against it. “We never talked about it. I didn’t know how.” He sounds ashamed, like he’s admitting to a failure so heinous that there can be no forgiveness. It’s probably a good thing those shoulders of his are so broad, what with the way he keeps heaping guilt on them.

“Well,” Tony says, opting for brutal honesty instead of dancing around the issue, “seems to me like you can’t fuck him up any worse.”

For a second, Steve looks outraged. Then it breaks and he just looks tired. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“It’s not supposed to make you feel worse.” Tony offers.

“Yeah,” Steve laughs bleakly, “thanks.”

“You’re most welcome.” Tony says, meaning to sound sincere but probably failing.

The sliver of levity Steve found in Tony’s words didn’t last long. “It’s just...when I think about what they did to him...”

“He’ll heal.” Tony promises, deadly serious. “Might take a whole lot of time and it might hurt like a bitch, but you guys have been through a lot together. You’ll get there.”

Steve laughed again, almost sounding as hollow as when Barnes spoke. “How’s that supposed to help when he doesn’t even remember me?”

“Come again?” Tony blinks. “Amnesia, really? Let me guess, he has an evil twin as well.” Honestly, how is this even Tony’s life?

“No.” Steve frowns. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay, well...still, amnesia, that’s a little more complicated. What, did he get it from the fall?” Tony asks, already wondering how he can sneak them past Happy and into Stark Towers for a full C.A.T scan...without Barnes’ metal arm making the whole floor explode in the process.

“Yeah, I think so. Nat managed to pull part of his file back from the 40s and 50s, and Sam and I have been piecing things together from what S.H.I.E.L.D had on him, but he couldn’t remember who he was when they found him, and then what with the wipes and everything-“

“Wait, who’s Sam?” Tony asks, “No, I don’t actually care. What do you mean ‘wipes and everything’?”

Steve frowns, pained. “I mean they’d wipe his memory after each mission.”

“Mission? What mission?” Tony yelps.

“Assassinations mostly.”

“Assassinations.” Tony echoes faintly.

“That’s how I found him.” Steve admits. “He tried to kill Fury, then he tried to kill me.”

“He tried to kill you.” Tony repeats, feeling like a parrot.

“But he didn’t,” Steve says, earnest like a little boy on Christmas, “he couldn’t do it. He even pulled me out of the water.”

Tony pinches his nose and takes a deep breath. “Steven,” he starts, exasperated, “I know you’re ninety percent muscle and ten percent dimples, but I’m pretty sure there is a brain in there somewhere. This?” He waves his arm in Barnes’ direction, “here’s my dead friend and by the way he’s a super assassin who tried to kill me and has no idea who I am...this is the kind of information that you should be starting with. Right after the ‘hello’. No, you know what, just skip the hello. Go straight to the assassin part.”

“But-“

“No buts! Just...think about it for a minute. He tried to kill you.”

“But he didn’t.” Steve quickly protests, “I mean, he shot me a couple of times but-“

“Oh for the love of all things...you are smarter than this. I know you are smarter than this because I can actually tolerate your company, which implies some level of intelligence, however small. Can we focus on the important things for a second?”

Steve looks offended. “I think not killing me is a pretty important thing.”

“Perhaps,” Tony allows, “but it’s ultimately irrelevant because the man sitting on my couch has no memory of being James Barnes, best friend to Steve Rogers, sidekick to Captain America and possessor of the world’s most tragic haircut.”

“He’s still Bucky.” Steve says quietly. “Even if he doesn’t remember it.”

"I am not arguing that." Tony reassures him, "what I am doing is asking a very important question which is: if he can't remember being Bucky Barnes, and by association can't remember being your BFF, why is he here?"

"What do you mean?" Steve asked, glancing back in Bucky's direction to make sure he is still there. He is like a new mother with an infant child, clearly unwilling to let his charge out of his sight for more than a few heartbeats at a time.

"I mean given the information you finally parted with, all we really know about him is that he, at one point in time, tried to kill you. Yes, yes, I know he didn't," Tony waves aside the protest before Steve can make it, "but the fact remains that he tried. So why is he here, now, sleeping on my couch and not watching my movies like this is the nineties and we're all thirteen year old girls?" Steve just blinks at him, his expression confused, "It's a good question, yes, I know it is, and since I'm in a generous mood, I will answer it."

"That's real kind of you." Steve says, proving once and for all that sass is officially a requirement in the S.H.I.E.L.D recruitment process.

"I know." Tony smirks. "So, option one: he's biding his time, seeing what information he can get from you before finishing the job. Which, fyi, I'd appreciate if you guys went out side when that happens. Like I said, blood on the carpet is not okay."

"There's an option two, right?" Steve asks, hopeful.

"Yes there is." Tony reassures him, "Option two: he's a duckling."

That's obviously the very last thing Steve expects to hear, because he starts to nod in agreement before his tired brain catches up with him. Then he's giving Tony a look that clearly says Steve thinks he's lost what little of his mind he had left. "A duckling."

"Or a gosling." Tony offers.

"I really don't think he's a baby bird, Stark." Steve says dryly. He looks like a man who suddenly has some wonderful new way to torment his best friend - Tony knows that look, it's one he turns on Rhodey often enough - but it leaves him as soon as he remembers that his best friend doesn't really exist any more, not the way he once was.

Tony clucks sympathetically. "Hear me out. You said they wiped his memories after each mission, yes?" Steve nods, "so he pretty much starts out as a blank slate, over and over." Which, wow, is an epically shitty way of managing ones personnel. Someone is obviously shit scared of Barnes and what he's capable of. He gets the feeling there is more to the story than Steve has revealed: not least of which needs to explain how Barnes doesn't look a day older than when he supposedly died.

"Yeah. They kept him in cryo between missions." Steve says, back to looking like he wants to remove someone's head with his bare hands.

Well that explains the aging, or lack of, but it presents a whole new set of complications. One of these days Tony really needs to get an M.D.

"Right, well, that's unpleasant." Tony agrees, "but it does support my theory. He's imprinting on you." It makes sense in an odd, my best friend's a thawed out super assassin kind of way. Those two must have real issues with the cold. No wonder they wound up in Tallahassee. Florida's a good a place as any to head to after a deep freeze. Anyway-

"But how? He doesn't remember me." Steve says miserably.

“He doesn’t have to. You reached out to him, yes?” Steve nods, “and he knows who he is supposed to be. He knows his name and who he was, even if he can’t remember it.”

“But-“

“What did I say about buts?” Tony cuts him off. “He’s sticking with you, Rogers, because that’s what the man he knows he’s supposed to be would do.” It’s kind of tragic in a way, really damn tragic, because the more Tony thinks about it, the less he can see them having any kind of happily ever after. It seems pretty unlikely that Barnes will ever recover his memory, and while that might not be all bad, especially if he’s spent the last seventy years killing people on the whims of his handlers, it means he’s never going to be exactly the same man Steve remembers. That makes him sad for Steve, to be so close to having his best friend back and yet forever so far.

That Steve is quite literally the only thing Barnes has in the world, well that makes Tony sad for Barnes too. There’s no possible way this is going to turn out well for Barnes. If whoever took a shot at him doesn’t try finish the job he going to end up hurt anyway, either by his own doing, or by Steve’s. The best case scenario for Rogers - that Barnes will stick by his side, will try and heal and makes a life for himself - is only going to mess Barnes up in the long run. You don’t pick idiots to turn into super assassins, and sooner or later Barnes is going to realize that he can never be the person Steve so desperately wants him to be.

“You really don’t think I can fix him, do you?” Steve asks, looking at Tony like the answer he’ll give could make or break his world.

Tony can’t find it in himself to crush that hope. That’s what Captain America is. Losing Bucky - again - could well destroy that. Tony’s not about to stand back and let it happen.

So he summons his most obnoxious smile and smacks Steve on the shoulder. “There might not be anything to fix,” he says, “but hey, I’m Tony Stark! I’ve done a lot more with a whole lot less. Don’t worry your pretty head, Rogers, we’ll work something out.”

Chapter End Notes

This should probably be known as the fic in which all my Steve/Bucky feels explode everywhere, and where Tony is both an innocent bystander and a devious instigator.

Chapter 3

Barnes sleeps for about an hour before he wakes up screaming the house down. Steve and Tony, who have spent the last forty-five minutes brewing every kind of coffee Tony has, charge into the room with a speed that suggests purpose, but as Steve's reaching for his friend, Tony pulls him back.

"You want him to crack your skull open?" He yells, having to put all his effort into slowing Steve down a pace or two.

Rogers clearly has some sense because he stops, but that doesn't stop the pained, helpless anger or the way his shoulders bunch under Tony's hands. Instead of charging in though, he approaches cautiously, calling out Barnes' name in a gentle, soothing voice. It has no effect. Barnes continues to thrash and howl like his life depends on breaking free of whatever hold that grips him.

It's harrowing as hell to watch, and it hurts to see Steve so helpless. Tony's supposed to be a fixer, but he's at a loss as to what to do here. In the end he runs over everything he knows about Barnes, which, granted, isn't much, and settles for yelling, "On your feet, soldier!" In the most authoritative voice he can manage.

Barnes springs upright so fast that Steve falls backwards on his ass in shock and the two of them end up staring at each other, Barnes shaking with cold sweat and Rogers unsure how best to offer comfort.

Barnes doesn't say anything, but eventually Steve can edge close enough to lay a hand on his arm. "You're freezing," he says, easing Barnes back down onto the couch. "Stay here. I'll go get you another sweater."

Tony thinks Rogers needs a second alone to compose himself and he's got no problem minding the traumatized killing machine on his couch. Tony's not stupid enough to think he'd be allowed anywhere close to Barnes right now and he wonders if Steve realizes how important it is that Barnes allows him in.

Tony goes to fetch him a glass of water when Barnes' head snaps up, suddenly alert.

"Please god, don't let that be people trying to kill us." Tony sighs. "I just finished one rebuild." The first of his new generation suits has also not been battle tested. Still, now's a good a time as any, he supposes.

The hail of bullets arrives not thirty-seconds later.

"Bucky!" Steve's shouts from the upstairs balcony are loud, even over the sounds of the explosions around them.

Tony can just about make out the shadow of Barnes on his left, his head angled towards the voice calling his name. "Steve!"

"I'm fine!" Tony yells at them both because really, of all the people currently in danger of dying he's the only one who won't just bounce back like a goddamn Jet Ball. "No really, don't worry about me!" He's already summoned his suit and it should be here any second but he needs to make the point.

He regrets it a second later as a mechanical limb wraps around his torso and he's suddenly hoisted

up and stuffed like a teddy bear under Barnes' arm. Then they're crashing through the hall, mindless of the explosions around them, through the kitchen, then through a *wall*, and finally out the window to roll on his front lawn. Barnes dumps him inelegantly in a flower bed, stares him down calmly and says, "Stay," like he genuinely thinks Tony ever does as he's told. Then, cool as ice cream and looking unconcerned by the death raining down on them, he charges back through the window he smashed, presumably in search of Steve.

It takes about five seconds for Tony to stop gaping, stop wondering what exactly just happened, and that's enough time for his new suit to arrive and wrap itself around him in a protective cocoon.

"Oh, those two deserve each other," he mutters, systems firing into action smoothly.

"Are you alright, sir?" JARVIS asks him.

"Peachy," Tony says. "I mean, my ego's a little dented. I should probably go fix that. Suggestions?"

"There are four attack helicopters currently firing on your residence. Might I suggest starting there?"

"Good call," Tony says, blasting into action.

He catches the first of the birds by surprise which, stupid, this is his house they are attacking and last time he checked he's still Iron Man so really... he takes out the propellers with one of the bird's own short range torpedoes and watches it crash into his summer house.

Two more have their fire focused on the upper levels of the house - where Tony last saw Steve. While he's not worried that Rogers is about to get taken down by a couple of bullets, he is a little offended that someone's trying to murder his houseguests. He has a reputation to think about and people will stop visiting if they think they're going to get shot to death.

There are forces on the ground, but he doesn't need to worry about them. Even hitching a ride on each of the bird's props, that's no more than four men per bird. It'll take more than a team of sixteen to bring down Captain America and Barnes, even without Tony as air support. It's a little insulting really.

He turns the two birds locked on the house against one another, flying in close enough to see the whites of the pilots eyes. That's about the same time he sees Steve drop kick a guy through one of the upstairs windows. Tony cringes. He would not want to be the guy standing between Rogers and Barnes right now.

Speaking of Barnes, there's a flash on Tony's left as another window goes out and two bodies tumble to the deck. Barnes uses the body of one of the mercs to break his fall, rolling over and throwing the poor bastard right into two of his buddies. If Steve looks pissed, Barnes looks like he's about to sit down and read the paper.

Tony leaves them to the rest of the ground force and focuses on bringing down the birds. It takes only seconds. He's brought down more than one chopper in his time. Compared to big alien slug thingies, this is a walk in the park.

They collide together with a god almighty explosion, no doubt waking most of the neighborhood and increasing his chances of being sued by half of the Hamptons.

"How are you finding the new model, sir?" JARVIS asks.

"Well, we've not exploded yet, so that's a plus," Tony responds.

There's a rapidly growing pile of bodies littering the lawn as Tony turns his attention to the last bird.

He's beaten to it.

"Bucky!" Steve yells, sprinting across the terrace. Tony has no idea what he's up to but Barnes clearly does. He charges forwards, dropping to his knees and skidding under the whirling propellers of the bird Tony just brought down. There's probably only centimeters between him and the blades, but he emerges from beneath them unscathed and rebounds off the small wall separating the terrace from the lawn just as Rogers reaches him. The two of them move in one fluid motion as Barnes grabs hold of the back of Steve's clothing, spins around and throws him like a javelin at the final bird.

It's a perfect shot, and Rogers sails right through into the cockpit, practically ripping the pilot from his seat with his bare hands before somersaulting backwards and landing gracefully in the small gap between pathway and topiary. Tony lands a second later, just as the final bird ruins his swimming pool beyond repair. It's a flaming mess and there is no way in hell Tony's ever going to be able to get any of his properties insured ever again, but Rogers and Barnes don't seem to care. They're giving each other intense, heated looks that speak volumes about their history, remembered or not. Rogers looks happier than Tony's ever seen him and Barnes has some color to his cheeks, enough to make him look alive and less like a badly animated corpse. Next time someone calls Tony weird he's pointing at these two.

"Okay, so I'm suddenly having an uncharacteristic surge of sympathy for Nazi Germany," Tony pants, shaking his head as he takes in the carnage of his yard. "I mean, not much. Some. Little bit."

"Was this what we were like?" Barnes asks Steve. "When we..." He trails off, distant.

"Well, you never threw me at a chopper before," Steve shrugs, a small, happy smile on his lips. "But yeah, sorta. You yelled at me a lot more."

Barnes cocks his head curiously. "Why?"

"Well," Steve looks a little sheepish, "I think it usually boiled down to you saying things like *'just because you're practically invincible these days doesn't mean you gotta test it every chance you get'*. You worried about me."

"Looks like you can take care of yourself," Barnes points out.

"It was habit, I think. You always looked out for me when we were kids. Protecting me just became instinct."

"And what about now?" Barnes asks, "are you expecting me to protect you still?" That's a seriously loaded question, one Tony can't quite interpret.

Steve just smiles sadly. "No," he says, "no, I think it's my turn to look out for you."

Barnes says nothing for a long time. Long enough that Tony feels the need to break the silence. "That's nice for you and all, but can we please talk about the fact that someone just blew up my house. Again?"

Steve startles, like he has forgotten Tony is even there. "I'm sorry," he says genuinely. "I never intended you to end up in danger like this."

“Oh bullshit,” Tony rolls his eyes. “I’m not upset about that. I’m upset about my hydrangeas.”

“Do you even know what a hydrangea is?” Steve asks incredulously.

“Uh, yeah. It’s a plant.” He’s fairly sure he’s got some somewhere.

“Your priorities are fucked.” Barnes says bluntly, making Steve bark with laughter. Tony grins as well.

“So I’ve been told.”

“Nice suit.” Barnes says.

“Nice throw.” Tony responds. “You know, you’re a lot chattier after you’ve killed things.”

The glare he gets from Steve is glacial but Barnes just stares back. “It’s an icebreaker.”

“Oh, you’re funny.” He grins, looking at Steve. “He’s funny. Hey funny guy, how’d you end up friends with old sourpuss here?” He asks Barnes as he rolls his eyes in Steve’s direction.

He’d hardly call Barnes’ expression animated, but it closes down instantly and Tony kicks himself. “I don’t know,” Barnes says, and the levity that comes after a narrow escape from death vanishes in an instant.

Cringing internally, Tony looks around his destroyed property once more. “Time to make ourselves scarce?”

“You got transport that survived?” Rogers asks, firmly back on mission.

“Oh please.” Tony scoffs. “Like that’s any fun.”

“Stark...” Steve starts warningly. Tony ignores him, propelling forward, grabbing Barnes by the mechanical arm and Rogers by back of his jeans, and jets up into the night’s sky.

“So, where to amigos?” Tony shouts down at them as they speed across the bay.

“Any place big enough to hide your body when we land!” Rogers yells at him over the wind.

“Right, so not Bruce’s place. Check.” Tony can’t help grin. It’s not often you catch Captain America off guard.

“Damnit Tony!” Steve yells.

“Don’t make me drop you!” Tony threatens.

“*Sir, I have Miss Potts on the line.*” JARVIS informs him.

“She moves fast.” Tony says admiringly. “Connect call.” There’s a tone, then, “Hey honey.”

“*Please tell me the alerts going off at your place are because of a technical malfunction,*” Pepper says with a long suffering sigh.

“Well I suppose they are malfunctioning now,” Tony allows, “bullets don’t really work with the interface.”

“*Tony!*”

“No harm, no foul. Well, some harm. Not to me but-“

“*Are you hurt?*”

“Not even the tiniest of scratches,” Tony promises her.

“*Good.*” Pepper scowls. “*Now get back here so I can strangle you.*”

“Your wish is my command,” Tony intones, ending the call.

Looks like they’re going to New York.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pepper's not the only one waiting for them in the city. Tony sets Rogers and Barnes down on the balcony and sheds the suit like a well worn jacket. Overall he's pleased with the results of his latest work but he's given JARVIS notes to address when he next gets the chance. There's always room for improvement.

"Honey, I'm home!" Tony calls out to Pepper, who rushes out on to the balcony and looks him up and down before satisfying herself that he's uninjured. Then she's alternately hugging and shaking him, her voice strong but choked as she reminds him that *they've talked about this*. "I'm sorry," Tony whispers to her, because god, he really is. He knows he's a magnet for trouble and he knows that in the past he's often gone looking for it, but he's promised her, and himself, that things are different now.

"It's okay." Pepper tells him, her hands soft on his cheeks. "You're okay." She never stays mad at him for long. It's something he's supremely careful not to abuse. He can tell exactly the second she pulls herself together and it's only then that he lets her out of his arms. She sniffs, summons a smile and turns it on Steve. "I'm sorry, Captain Rogers. It's good to see you: we were so worried after what happened in Washington."

Steve smiles back. "I got the flowers. They were real pretty, thank you."

"We sent flowers?" Tony asks, trying like hell to play it cool. He gives her a desperate look that she ignores by default.

"Tony picked them," Pepper says, determined as ever to ruin Tony's reputation.

"He did, did he?" Steve asks knowingly.

Pepper leads them all into the wide social space inside. "He spent a lot of time trying to find your favorites."

It's dark enough to hide the fact that Tony's ears are a little pink, even when someone has as sharp a vision as Steve does. That doesn't stop him wanting to crawl back into his suit and hide. "Really, honey? Do we have to tell him that?"

"He might think you don't like him if I don't," Pepper says with a knowing smile flashed in Steve's direction.

"I don't," Tony says firmly. "I tolerate him. Barely."

"Uh huh." Steve chuckles. "Right. I get it."

"Are we done with this conversation? Yes. Good. We are. I'm making an executive decision. Done. No more." Pepper's just about to turn her attention on Barnes when Tony spots a familiar figure lurking by his wet bar. "Barton, you better not be getting feathers in my whiskey."

Clint Barton shoots him the same easy going smile he turns on everything and hops down from his perch. "Relax, Stark. Your booze is way too fancy for my tastes. Cap." He nods at Steve then turns his gaze on Barnes.

"Clint Barton." He says, no hand extended to shake, just a cool, appraising look.

"And I'm Pepper." Tony can't help a fond grin at the slightly sheepish tone to her voice.

Barnes looks at the both warily. "Bucky," he says. It doesn't escape Tony's attention that he introduces himself by the moniker Steve identifies him with, and not with his actual name.

"Nice to put a name to the face." Barton nods, casually enough.

"We've met?" Barnes asks, his expression becoming even more wary than before.

Barton just shrugs. "You shot me the one time. It was awesome."

"It was?" Barnes asks. So far, as it turns out, Barnes's shot a whole lot of people that Tony knows and none of them seem all that put out by it. Clearly Tony is friends with lunatics. "Me shooting you was awesome?"

"Well no," Barton agrees. "It was painful. But the shot. My god, the shot was perfect. Like, actually perfect. I couldn't have taken it better myself and that's pretty much the highest seal of approval your marksmanship can get."

"You're a strange man, Barton," Tony says, shaking his head.

"And you're bleeding!" Pepper exclaims, looking down at Barnes' bare feet. They're covered with dried blood and fragments of glass. Tony cringes, knowing exactly how it happened. Barnes hadn't hesitated before protecting him. It's not something Tony's really used to, and he doesn't like the feeling that comes from knowing that the person who did is injured because of it. It brings him back to Yinsen and a cave in Afghanistan he doesn't ever think about.

Steve makes a pained sound as he hustles Barnes over to the couch so he can take the weight off his feet. Barnes seems bemused by the whole thing and Tony itches to run a full diagnostic on the guy.

He hopes to hell that there's something they did to him that limits the pain he feels because the alternative is too horrible to dwell on.

Even the demi-gods he knows - hell, even Bruce in all his hulked out green glory - they acknowledge pain. It might not stop them or even slow them down, but they accept it is there.

Tony follows them to the couch. "Okay Bucky," he says, purposely using the name Barnes identifies with, "repeat after me: ow, that hurts. I might need medical attention now."

He honestly can't tell if Barnes is being genuine or mocking him when he obediently repeats Tony word for word. Or maybe neither, and he merely repeats what he's told to repeat because that's how he's been conditioned to respond. Either way it makes Tony angry and nauseous in equal measures. This could be a problem, one they'll need to monitor closely. Right now Barnes can't be trusted with his own safety. Whether he stays quiet out of habit or fear or something more sinister, they can't rely on him to tell them when he's hurt, which means they need to be all the more observant. The injuries he arrived with and the ones he has now, they aren't really serious and they'll heal in a day or so, but if the pattern sticks the next problem they could be facing is Barnes sitting quietly through a gut shot or something equally as serious.

It's Pepper's turn to play nurse and of course Steve's not letting Barnes out of his sight, so while the two of them set to digging out the shards of glass from Barnes' feet, Tony and Clint move a short distance away from them. Tony keeps an eye on all three of them, not because he thinks Steve and Pepper incapable of dealing with the situation, but because he's hardwired to put Pepper's safety

above everything else and Barnes, docile as he is right now, could still be a threat to her, even if it's not conscious.

"Why are you here really?" Tony asks Barton, not because he's not glad to see Barton, far from it actually, but because there's always an ulterior motive no matter what they all would like to pretend.

Barton's a stand up guy and the most genuinely likable spy Tony's ever met. He's also on Tony's wavelength when it comes to getting down to the point. "You need someone to watch your back."

Tony's touched. "Who? Me me or them me or-"

"All of you," Barton says seriously. "We - Nat and I - figured Rogers would come to you for help once he and Bucky made it out of Florida."

"You did?" Tony asks, stunned. He can think of a dozen people Steve would have picked over him, even with the resources Tony has at his disposal.

Barton looks at him like he's an idiot. "Yes," he says, simple as that.

"And that brings you here why?"

"Because neither of you idiots have a single shred of self preservation between you," Barton says bluntly.

"Well that's just a gross exaggeration."

"I'm out of the country on an op for six months and I come back to find you've given your home address to a terrorist and Steve of all people has gone rogue. Fury had to talk me out of ditching my cover and shooting both your asses full of arrows."

"Remind me to send him a gift basket," Tony says. He had no idea that Barton, that anyone for that matter, had worried about him during the whole Mandarin/Killian fiasco. He'd done the whole thing without a safety net and to be honest, he's never really stopped to think that maybe he has one now. No one has ever bothered to stick around that much, if you make a glorious exception for Rhodey and Pepper, and Tony's not stupid, nor does he lack self-awareness, quite the opposite. The thought that their merry band of superheroes might actually care what happens to him past their brief shared time at SHIELD is, well. Touching, and unexpected, and goddamn, where's his tablet, Tony is the master of deflection, never it be said that he's going to get caught off guards by emotional stuff and with Barton of all people.

"Yeah, well, Do't do it again. It takes Nat and I forever to break new people in and we've just got you how we like you," Barton says, covering up for the fact that his concern shines right through his sarcastic tone.

"You're all heart, Barton." Tony says dryly.

Clint grins. "I mean it. Don't pull shit like that again okay? I have a very nervous disposition."

"We should probably talk about the fact that someone just tried to blow up my house then, yes?"

"In the morning," Barton says as he looks over to Barnes. "There's a couple more people we need to bring into this and I don't want to have to have this conversation twice."

"Why do I get the feeling you know more about all this than I should probably be comfortable

with?" Tony asks suspiciously.

"Because you're paranoid. And I do. I told you I met him before. Let's just leave it at that for now."

"It better be a good story, Barton." Tony says, begrudgingly trusting him.

Clint's smile isn't a nice one. "Not even close," he says unhappily.

There's not much Tony can say to that, so he keeps his thoughts to himself as they go back inside.

Twenty minutes later, when they should all be thinking about sleeping but are still wired from the night's drama, Pepper sets warm muffins and toast down on the table they are sat around. Tony's famished and as usual not realized it. He grabs one and tears into it with relish.

It's not until Tony's watched Pepper hand Steve a stack of toast the size of his head that they notice Barnes hasn't touched what's been put in front of him.

"Bucky," Steve says, pained, "You gotta eat."

Barnes lifts his head to look at Steve, somehow both stubborn and curious. "No, I don't."

"Think you'll find that you do," Tony assures him gently.

"I don't," Barnes repeats, sounding surly.

"Have you ever?" Clint asks curiously.

There's something almost petulant in the way Barnes looks at him. "I told you. I don't need to."

"Actually you do," Tony says, "In fact you need to be eating a hell of a lot to support your metabolic functions. One of the downsides to all that super strength, super healing stuff. Look at Rogers." But Steve hasn't touched his plate at all.

Barnes doesn't look convinced, but when Steve says, "Please Bucky, eat," He picks up a slice eats it as calmly and methodically as he does everything else. There's a tiny surge of pleasure that's only noticeable in his eyes, but it's there, brought about by toast of all things.

It makes a twisted kind of sense, Tony supposes. One of the first steps in brainwashing someone is to enforce a high dependency helplessness on them. Starvation and torture are just a couple of elements in a very long, unpleasant list. It's an uncomfortable conclusion to reach, especially after Tony's seen the way Barnes can fight. Physically the man's a walking weapon, but mentally, emotionally...helpless is really the only word to describe him.

He knows Steve is seeing the same things. Tony can't imagine what it must be like to see someone he cares about so deeply find such a crucial aspect of human survival so alien and new. He doesn't want to.

There's a loud scrape as Steve pushes back his chair. "Excuse me," he says, dismissing himself from the table.

Barnes sets down the second piece of toast. "He's upset," he says, sounding just as confused by Steve's reaction as he is by the concept of eating.

"Not with you," Tony assures Barnes. He knows exactly why Steve's made himself scarce. He's feeling a similar urge himself, and Barnes isn't his oldest and closest friend. "I'll go talk to him," Tony says, offering Barnes a smile. "Eat. The sooner we get you used to bread the sooner I can

abuse New York's finest takeout services."

He leaves Barnes with Pepper and Clint, heading outside to find Steve leaning over the railing and looking down to the streets below. "If you're going to tell me to calm down-" Steve starts.

"I'm not," Tony assures him. "Rage away. Better out here than in there, trust me."

"I do trust you," Steve says abruptly. "You think I'd have brought him to you if I didn't? You think I'm ever letting anyone I don't trust anywhere near him?"

"I'll forego mentioning how trusting me is never a smart decision, ever - you should talk to my lawyers, they'll enlighten you - in favor of pointing out that it's a small world you're making for yourself, Cap." Tony says. He understands the need for isolation, for control. He's withdrawn from the world and the things in it to protect himself before, he has no problem seeing Steve wanting to do the same. The people who only see the shield, they expect things from Captain America that they have no right to expect. Steve's a good man, the very best, really, but he's got his breaking point just like everyone else and it exists in the form of a man who has been ripped apart from the inside out and left scattered to the wind.

Steve just makes a soft sound of distress. "How could they do that to him, Tony? Why?" He asks, desperately wanting an answer that Tony can't possibly give. 'Why' is a damn dangerous thing to ask and it very rarely comes with the response you want.

There's no reason Tony can possibly give to justify what's happened both to Bucky and to Steve. He can't give false hope, but he can't respond with his usual sarcasm either. Instead he says, "You need to sleep, buddy. I know those batteries of yours can power on for a long time, but take it from someone who knows, you gotta switch off. Even for a little bit."

"But I-" He looks back inside.

"He's safe here. That's why you came to me, remember?"

The exhaustion he can see in Steve's eyes isn't physical. He can probably go on another few days if he has to. No, his weariness is all in his emotions, and when it comes down to matters of the heart it doesn't make a damn bit of difference if you're human or a genetically enhanced super soldier. What hurts, hurts.

"What if he needs me?" Steve asks.

"Then I'll wake you up," Tony promises.

Steve nods, slowly, reluctantly.

"I'll be fine." They both jump at the sound of Bucky's voice. Stealthy is something of an understatement. "Sleep. You need it."

"Bucky-"

"It's two against one, Rogers. Don't make me get Pepper on our side. Now, let's get you tucked up in bed and if you're really good I'll make you hot cocoa," He catches the blank look on Barnes' face. Right, because that's probably something else denied to him these past seventy years. Autonomy, freedom, and mini marshmallows. Tony can fix one of those things right now. "You know what, let's do this properly. Hot chocolates all round, slumber party style."

"We used to do that," Steve says, his eyes on Barnes.

Barnes glances inside and seems to come to a decision. He looks back at Steve and says, "Show me."

Chapter End Notes

I'm a total failboat at technology, but Titheniel is teaching me how to navigate both this and tumblr. It's exciting! You can find me [here](#)

She also betad, prodded and schooled this chapter into something far superior to what it started as, as she only teased me a little bit, so I guess that makes her my Tony.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Major love to Titheniel who keeps this thing on track, minds my silly typos and makes me think a whole lot harder about what goes down on the page.

I'm so hope you're enjoying what was just supposed to be a way to relieve all the

Feels! Thank you for the lovely comments and kudos! x

P.S. I've made it on to [tumblr!](#)

Steve does sleep. Surprisingly, Barnes does too. They end up resting side by side, not touching, not quite, but in a nest of bedding on the floor. Tony can't help but wonder if this was how they slept when they were kids, when they were soldiers. It's endearing, painfully so. Tony's not stupid enough to think that everything is okay, or even that they'll both manage to sleep through the night, but for a second he can almost pretend.

Barton props himself up in the weirdest, most uncomfortable place imaginable - a spot that gives him a view of the entire floor, and room to cover everyone on it - and sleeps the sleep of snipers everywhere. Clint's a wonder of a man and can literally sleep no matter where he is or what he's doing. It's a combat quirk found in operatives so overworked and stretched thin by the demands of their job that they literally need to be able to catch the zzz's wherever and whenever they can. Clint is therefore the only person in the world who has fallen asleep while Tony's been talking to him.

He'd like to catch some shut-eye himself, but he's too buzzed, too stressed out by the situation at hand. He doesn't go to the lab. He's self-aware enough now to know that is his way of hiding, and once he starts he'll not emerge for days. His friends need him and he's not about to let them down.

So instead he wanders out onto the balcony and sits with his legs hanging over the edge, his eyes and his mind on the streets far below. After a few minutes there's a soft brush of fabric against his skin, and Pepper takes a seat beside him, curling against his arm and cocooning them from the night's chill. She doesn't say anything, she doesn't have to, and there is nothing that can really express how either of them feel. She just lays her head on his shoulder and they watch the world move around them, heedless as ever to the hurts that lay just out of sight.

The peace doesn't last. Three hours later and Barnes is awake and screaming again, and this time neither Tony or Steve can't calm him down. Clint hops down from his perch, his expression grim and tight. He keeps his distance with Tony and Pepper, who can only watch helplessly as Steve tries to soothe the desperate screaming coming from Barnes' hunched figure. The cries are as angry as they are terrified and in a language Tony doesn't understand but has heard Natasha speak before, but Barnes doesn't really move a whole lot, and he doesn't lash out at Steve when he tries to make contact.

It takes a good twenty minutes for Steve to make any progress, even though Tony knows Barnes woke up only minutes after he started screaming. Tony's been there. It's never been this bad, not even close, but he's woken from nightmares and been convinced he was still dreaming. Pepper, who has never been able to stand by and watch someone suffer needlessly, makes a move forward but is stilled by Clint's touch to her arm. "Don't." He tells her. "You can't help him."

“But-“ Pepper says, looking on helplessly.

Clint’s shake of the head is sharp and his words are too. “You can’t help.” He repeats. Under normal circumstances Pepper would never stand for being spoken to that way, but she knows as well as he does how Clint must be taking all this. He’s the only one of them who might have a chance of understanding who Barnes is feeling right now, the only one of them who has had their mind turned against them.

Tony takes Pepper’s hand and draws her back gently. She doesn’t like it - he doesn’t like it - but like Barton says, there is nothing they can do to help him at this point.

By the time Barnes has settled down, Steve’s hand on his ankle and his voice a low, soothing murmur of noise, they are all wide awake and swearing off sleep for the foreseeable future. Tony makes enough coffee to power blue collar New York while Clint climbs back up to his vantage point and broods furiously. Tony knows he should probably talk to him, knows that this has got to be string some pretty unpleasant memories for Barton as well. If Tony were anyone but Tony, he’d leave Barton alone. He’s not, and he knows that someone needs to shake the cobwebs from Clint’s head before things get any more tangled up there.

“Hey Robin Hood?” Tony calls up to him, “I got a cup of jarva with your name on it. Columbian Blend, your favorite. You might wanna come down here and rescue it before it’s gone.”

“Not now, Stark.” Barton eventually responds.

Tony scowls up at him. “You’re turning down coffee. I’m officially worried. Get your ass down here before I start pelting you with teaspoons.” Clint practically growls in response. “Fine. I’ll tell Romanov what happened to her Oakleys.” He threatens. Natasha is pretty pragmatic about her personal belongings, but the sunglasses have a backstory she’s refusing to part with and it’s one that clearly holds some kind of sentimental value. Clint’s still blaming Dummy for their death and Tony’s willing to let him so long as it gives him leverage in times like this.

He lands beside Tony virtually silently. “You’re an asshole.” Clint tells him, though he’s neither unkind or accusing with it.

Tony shrugs and flashes his usual carefree grin. “I’ve been called so much worse.” He hands Clint his coffee and all is forgiven.

“You brew a mean cup of coffee though.”

“Yeah. If the genius thing ever falls though I think I’ve got a pretty safe future as a barista.” Tony leads him away from where Steve is still talking quietly to Barnes, and says, “So, we gonna talk about this?”

“About what?” Clint asks, immediately on the defensive. Clint likes talking about his feelings even less than Tony likes admitting he has a heart. He’s also the spookiest spook to ever spook, and he knows exactly how to turn any subtle attempts Tony might make back around. Direct is the only way to go, which is fortunate because Tony’s a pretty direct guy.

“About the brainwashed super-assassin that’s bringing back all kinds of painful and traumatic memories from that time Loki turned you into one of his, now I think Fury called you a flying monkey...” Make that very direct.

“Fury’s a dick.” Clint says, his jaw pulling into a tight line of displeasure. Tony's not seen him this shaken up since the adrenaline wore off after they closed the portal. It must be tough for him,

seeing the aftermath of Barnes' own brainwashing in such a disturbing, visceral way.

"Probably why Barnes shot him." Tony says, testing the waters. He's never sure how much Barton knows but has come to assume that it's usually a hell of a lot more than he's given credit for. People often forget that the eyes they rely on to protect them come attached to a set of ears as well.

"They'll crucify him for that." Barton says, both abruptly changing the subject and steering it back on course all at once.

"Fury?" Tony asks seriously.

"All of it. Washington, HYDRA. Forget the things the Winter Soldier has actually done; they'll nail everything else on top of him as well. People always need someone to blame."

"That why you've been out on ops all year?" Tony asks knowingly.

Barton's smile is self-depreciating and a little bitter. "Wasn't like Loki stayed around to take the rap."

He doesn't like thinking about Clint alone in the field after everything that happened in New York, certainly not if the only reason he was there so was that he could avoid prosecution for something he'd never had any control over. Knowing how messed up Barton was at the time, Tony can't see him passing the psych evals he'd need to clear before being reinstated to duty and he can only guess that Fury signed off on it. "You were under the magic spell of a lunatic demi-god and his army of creepy lizard monsters." Tony says bluntly. "They can't blame you for what happened."

"Maybe not." Barton shrugs. "But it was my arrows that ended lives, my face that people saw doing it. Even if I'm not directly responsible, he used me to do it." He's talking about Coulson. Tony has no idea how to make that wound any less painful. That loss causes him enough pain, he can't imagine how Barton feels about it.

"Really not your fault." Tony says firmly. It's pointless, but it's the only thing he can say. "I'm gonna be saying those words a lot, aren't it? God, brainwashing sucks."

"You're telling me." Barton snorts, the shadows of the conversation pushed back to the depths of his eyes. He's done talking about things, and Tony's not going to push. They'll have the chance later. "You gonna make me more coffee, Stark?" Barton smirks, handing Tony his empty mug.

"Do I look like your maid, Barton?" Tony asks, allowing him the cover.

"You look like an idiot." Barton says, "seriously, what is it with you billionaires and dressing like hobos?" Tony pretends he doesn't hear, then when Barton's not looking he heaps a spoonful of salt into his coffee. The resulting yell is well worth the waste of good caffeine.

About an hour after Barnes wakes up from his nightmare, when he's settled down and withdrawn even further into himself, Steve manages to coax him into Tony's master bathroom. Aside from not letting him eat or sleep of his own free will, HYDRA apparently never endorsed hot showers. While Barnes is reluctant to enter the stall, once the magic of Tony's very expensive indoor plumbing gets to work he realizes that they might have a fight on their hands if they want to get Barnes out of it again. He stands under the spray, either unaware or unconcerned that he's naked in front of them, and lets the water cascade over his head and back. His shoulders loosen as he leans into the heat and his expression becomes something blissful. They leave him to it, though Steve doesn't close the door behind them out of caution.

An hour later and he's still in there. The heat's continuous, so there's no reason to worry on that

front, but Tony's still not had a proper look at that arm of his and he's a teeny, tiny bit worried about waterlogged hardware.

Steve only has to ask him to get out for him to do so and he emerges a few minutes later with dripping hair. It desperately needs cutting, just like the beard on his face needs some taming, but Tony's not going to be the one to bring it up. If Barnes wants to grow it all out and look like a Canadian lumberjack then Tony will support him one hundred percent. The problem is that they don't know for sure if it is his choice, or if it's the same situation as him eating or acknowledging the fact that he's bleeding all over the place.

He desperately wants to know what it is that Barnes wants to do. He wants to hear him express a desire for something, be it a shave, more toast, or another hour under the hot water. Knowing he won't any time soon sits heavy in his gut, right alongside the strange sensation he feels when he starts to recognize that he cares so much about someone he just met. Barnes has spoken less than a handful of words to him, but he also saved Tony's life. He's killed more people than Tony cares to imagine - he nearly killed Steve and Fury, the first of whom he likes and admires the second of whom he does so begrudgingly, no matter what he might present on the outside.

But still, even knowing exactly what Barnes has done and is capable of, he's not the most dangerous house guest Tony's ever had. Bruce has leveled half a city under the influence of his alter ego and Tony no more blames him for that than he does Clint for what he did under Loki's control. None of them had any choice in the matter. They actually have far less responsibility for the results of their actions than Tony does any of his. He was well aware of what he was doing when he was in the weapons business, and his creations have probably cost more lives than the Hulk and the Winter Soldier's body count combined.

So when Barnes nods his head at Steve's suggestion of a shave, Tony just about controls his urge to throw his arms in the air and cheer. Let it never be said that he doesn't exercise self-control.

"You sure?" Steve asks him. "You don't have to."

Barnes looks at his reflection in the mirror and touches his beard. The Winter Soldier had been shaved, which is creepy on levels Tony doesn't like to think about, and it's obvious that Barnes finds the feeling of the bristly hair foreign.

"Okay then." Steve beams. The man's a damn ray of sunshine when he's smiling at Barnes. He asks Tony to fetch him a couple of razors and some small scissors, then fishes a canister of shaving cream out from one of the bathroom cabinets.

"You shave." Barnes says, somewhere between a question and a statement.

"Yeah." Steve grins wryly. "But I really can't carry off facial hair." Tony can't imagine him with a beard. Steve's clean-cut in every sense of the word.

Tony bites back on a blithe comment as he sets the straight razors down. Steve's adapted extremely quickly to everything in the modern world, so Tony suspects that his preference for an old traditional shave has nothing to do with any particular old timey preference over an electric razor, but rather an appreciation of the ritual. Howard used to shave like that and that's where Tony draws the line. He's not going to go down that path and he's not going to think about his father when the two men in his bathroom who probably knew Howard better than Tony ever could.

Tony's not particularly worried when they pick up the blades. Steve's hands are almost as steady as Clint's, and by all accounts Barnes knows his way around sharp objects. He sets out a couple of towels and makes to leave.

"You can stay." Steve tells him. "You know, it's about time you learn how to shave properly, Stark."

Tony scoffs but doesn't move from his spot. He knows the real reason Steve's asked him to stay is less about Tony's grooming habits and more that he's trying to establish trust between Tony and Barnes, but he's touched either way.

Satisfied Tony's not leaving, Steve turns all his attention on Barnes, who is standing in front of the mirror with a towel around his hips, his expression shuttered.

"You know," Steve starts, giving him an encouraging smile, "you're the one who taught me how to do this." He passes Barnes the small scissors and shows him how to trim the thick hair into something more manageable. "My dad never bothered and yours was dead before you were a teenager. You'd never tell me where you'd learned how to do it, even when I begged you." He's smiling softly as Barnes sets down the scissors carefully, hanging on Steve's every word. He shows Barnes how to prep for the shave, washing with soap and water before rinsing, keeping up a steady stream of talk while he does. "First time I tried it I ended up practically hacking half my face off," Steve laughs quietly, "you freaked right out."

He encourages Barnes to hold out his hands and squirts a liberal amount of shaving cream into them.

Tony doesn't have to pretend to be interested in what Steve's saying. He's never revealed a thing about his pre-army days except for the odd joke about how scrawny he'd been pre-serum. Now Tony wonders if he's never talked about it because all the things worth mentioning are focused around Bucky Barnes. It makes him want to know the man Barnes used to be, because that's a man who has the undying devotion of Captain America, of Steve Rogers. That's a man who is pretty damn special.

Barnes doesn't talk as he follows Steve's instructions, applying the foam as shown, the razor held carefully in fingers that have sliced flesh open more often than they have glided a blade across skin. He doesn't have to try hard. The muscle memory is clearly there, and he gives himself a smooth, close shave. When they are done, Steve suddenly grins. "You gotta try this," he says conspiratorially, snagging Tony's aftershave from the shelf. "We only had Aqua Velva. I remember when you first convinced me to try it. I thought I was going to die." The memory is clearly a funny one, and Tony can just imagine it. His aftershave is nothing like Aqua Velva however, and it glides on skin like a kiss of ice cool water.

Barnes and Steve wash out the razors and set them down on the counter. Barnes runs his hands curiously over his cheeks while Steve beams happily. Without the bush on his face, Barnes looks a hell of a lot younger.

Pepper has found both him and Steve more suitable clothing to wear, as well as shoes for Barnes. The injuries they treated both before and after the attack have pretty much healed already. Only the deepest of the bullet wounds can really be considered an open wound at all. The rest are just sore, raw, but well healing flesh. There's one plus at least.

By the time they rejoin Pepper and Clint in the main room, Barnes is dressed in dark jeans and a henley. He's tied his long hair back away from his face and almost looks normal, though the shadows under his eyes are still far too pronounced.

While they were busy in the bathroom, the 'others' Barton had mentioned have arrived. Tony lights up when he sees Bruce sitting on his couch, chatting animatedly to Natasha, who glances up at their arrival, her usually mirrored expression softening to something genuinely fond when it lands

on Steve. Clearly their escapades with SHIELD have changed something in that dynamic. Up until then Tony would have said that the only person alive who could inspire that look was Clint.

"Where's Sam?" Steve asks Natasha as soon as he's done greeting Bruce.

"Working," Natasha says, "he's due to meet us here at fifteen hundred. Hello Bucky."

Barnes looks on edge with the number of people in the room, but he returns Natasha's greeting with a nod of the head.

"I'm Bruce," Banner says with a friendly smile and a small wave of the hand, "nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you." Barnes echoes, trying out the repetition for size.

"We expecting anyone else?" Tony asks Barton, who shakes his head.

"This is it. For now, anyway." Barton announces. "Let's keep this simple and to the point." He addresses the room calmly and with an air of authority he doesn't usually express. When it comes down to years in the field, He's got more consecutive experience than all of them, Steve included. Barnes is perhaps the exception, but since he's the reason they are there that doesn't help them much. "Three weeks ago Cap uncovered a compromise in SHIELD that had allowed HYDRA to infiltrate our ranks and use our resources to further their own agenda. In order to expose that element, Black Widow and Director Fury took both operations public. I think we all know the fallout that's followed." There's nothing accusatory in his voice at all. He's calm and matter-of-fact, despite what must have been both a huge shock and a threat to his safety at the time. "The incident also brought to light the identity of a high level intelligence asset known as the Winter Soldier."

"Me." Barnes says quietly.

"Only in a little way." Bruce says kindly.

Clint nods in agreement. Then he grimaces. "You're not a popular guy, by the way." He says apologetically. "Or maybe you are, I guess it depends on your perspective."

"Mossad have a standing kill order out on you. MI6 and the CIA as well. I don't know what you did in Afghanistan, but the NSD want you gone in a big way, same with China, but they hate everyone so I wouldn't worry too much about that. Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-Harbyya wa al-Istitla will have you shot on sight and I'd be avoiding Iran, Pakistan and North Korea like the plague."

"That's quite a list." Bruce says, troubled. Barnes looks unaffected by the sheer number of people out to get him, but unaffected is his usual expression.

"Those are just the ones that want you dead, no questions asked." Natasha adds. "FSB, the CIA and MI19 want you brought in alive."

"And somehow that manages to be creepier." Tony shudders.

"I thought MI19 was shut down after the war?" Steve frowns. He sounds particularly troubled by their inclusion and Tony can't blame him. The British War Office had a hell of a reputation between 38-45, with departments ranging from MI1, the codebreakers, to MI19, the interrogators. Supposedly they'd all been integrated into MI6 and MI7 after the end of the war. MI19 had operated a particularly shady operation in Kensington Palace Gardens, right in the heart of London. They adamantly denied using physical torture on POWs, but were frank in admitting that the psychological torments they enacted were often just as damaging. Tony doesn't like the idea of them anywhere near Barnes in his current state and it's obvious that neither does Steve.

"Why do they want him alive?" Pepper asks, "why not want him dead like the others?"

"Because they think they can reprogram him." Natasha says bluntly.

Barnes tenses violently. "That's not going to happen." Steve assures him. "What about HYDRA?"

"They're what I'm more worried about." Clint admits. "Pierce wanted you dead." He tells Barnes. "You were never supposed to survive your last mission."

"But why?" Steve exclaims. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Neither does the way they sent him up against us." Natasha points out. "The Winter Soldier is a covert operative, remember? He's a ghost."

"And ghosts don't walk down Mainstreet firing after their targets." Steve agrees reluctantly. "But why?"

"Because he'd have done his job. HYDRA would have had their domination." Clint shrugs. "What use would they have for such a high risk operative when they've got the firepower they were counting on at their fingertips? If you'd not killed him, Steve, they'd just have had someone else do the job."

"And now?" Steve asks warily, looking in Barnes' direction out of fear.

"Well they failed, didn't they?" Bruce frowns. "I'd guess they'd want him back."

"I don't want to go back." The words Barnes speaks are so soft and hesitant Tony can barely hear them. It's the first time that Barnes has expressed any desire at all out of his own volition without being prodded, poked and questioned. The look in Steve's eyes telegraph the kind of hurt that Tony associates with blinding, hot flashes of Pepper falling through fire and the hollowing abyss it carved out in the space where his arc reactor used to be.

"You're not." Steve says firmly. It says a lot about how well respected Steve is by their motley little crew that no one says a word to contradict him. Getting involved with Barnes' situation is dangerous for all of them, in more ways than one. Bruce, who is adamantly in avoidance of governments and the military in equal measures only looks curious at the vehemence in Steve's voice. Natasha and Clint, who know best perhaps the kind of mess they are about to wade through only sit quietly. Clint's expression is tight and hard, Natasha's is a carefully blank mask. Neither one of them are the kind to do anything they don't want to, no matter the cause. They trust Steve, even when his judgement is clearly a little skewed. Truth is, Tony trusts him as well. He's the only person Tony will ever willingly take orders from and maybe the only person he'd follow into a fight of this magnitude based purely on the belief that the person they were fighting for was worth the risk.

"You don't know them." Barnes says, his gaze haunted. "They get what they want. They always get what they want." Tony still can't clock just how much Barnes remembers from his time with HYDRA but he thinks the fear Barnes has of them works the same way the trust he has in Steve does. He doesn't remember Steve, but he does know him. He might not remember what HYDRA did to him, but he knows it's bad.

"Not this time." Steve says, moving so he's close enough to rest his hand on Barnes' human arm.

"You got a plan, Cap?" Natasha asks him.

Steve doesn't break eye contact with Barnes. "I'm Captain America. I always have a plan."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Major thanks to Titheniel for the edit, tumblr for the distracting gifs and Bucky Barnes for making me want to drag everyone down with me as I drown in feels.

Steve doesn't break eye contact with Barnes. "I'm Captain America. I always have a plan." He probably means the worlds to be reassuring but in truth, they sound a little bitter, and Barnes doesn't look convinced.

"Why do I get the feeling you've said that to me before?" He says reluctantly. Steve sighs miserably and Tony wishes to god he understood the history there. He wishes to god Barnes did too, because it's obvious Steve needs that, desperately.

The silence between the two of them becomes heavy, uncomfortable, and Tony can't stand it. "He's the Star Spangled Man With A Plan." Tony announces in an overly cheerful voice, in no way ever going to let Steve live that one down. He can't help but imagine that Bucky Barnes would approve. It sounds like Barnes had been as much an older brother as he was a best friend and that's the kind of shit brothers love to tease each other with.

Barnes blinks at the reference as Steve grimaces. "Long story." Steve says in a way that suggests it really, really is. "It's not interesting."

"Oh it is." Tony corrects. "But perhaps not the best time. I'll fill you in later." He winks at Barnes who merely pulls his mouth together in a frown.

"As always, Stark, your input is invaluable." Steve says a little testily. His patience is the thinnest Tony's ever seen it, and that includes the time they nearly started a fight on the helicarrier.

Pepper looks between Steve and Tony and reaches for her phone as it starts to vibrate. "I've got people asking questions about the four helicopters laying in pieces on our lawn, so I'm going to go deal with that. Try and remember that you like each other, okay?"

"Uh, damn right it is." Tony agrees, nodding as Pepper leaves but keeping the conversation focused on Steve. "So, this plan of yours? I'm assuming it involves things exploding, because that is most definitely a theme I'm sensing."

"I think maybe we should avoid blowing things up." Bruce pipes up mildly from his spot on the couch. "People are still a little annoyed about the whole New York thing."

It's only then that he notices that Steve's stopped paying attention to them all and is focused entirely on Barnes.

"Bucky?" Steve asks, reading something in the bare traces of emotion on Barnes's face. He's got his gaze locked on Clint, and it's not particularly friendly.

"You said we've met." He says, his tone accusatory. Tony can feel the tension in the room rise as Barnes becomes more hostile. Steve lays a hand on his arm gently as he tries to defuse the situation.

“He’s not HYDRA, Bucky.” Steve reassures. There’s a resounding cringe in the room as they take that in. They’ve been lucky, Tony realizes. Were Steve not in the picture, Barnes would probably be a whole lot less patient with the situation. Barnes is letting Steve lead, trusting him in ways that are astounding really, given what he’s been through.

“Why did I shoot you?” Barnes demands. “You weren’t my mission.”

“How’d you know that?” Barton asks mildly. He’s crossed his arms in a way that suggests he’s relaxed, but his weight has shifted, as has his stance, taking a lower center of gravity that will mean he can move much faster into action should things escalate. Clint’s not treating Barnes as a threat, but he’s not pretending that he isn’t one.

“Because if you were you’d be dead.” Barnes responds coolly. His body language radiates hostility as he eyes Clint up and down, looking for something in him that Tony can’t define.

“Nearly was.” Clint snorts. “But you’re right. We were actually assigned the same target. I was your paint.” There’s a whole lingo for assassins and spies that Tony should really start getting to grips with now there are so many of them in his life.

“I’m sorry,” Bruce puts in, “but what’s a paint?” At least he and Bruce can commiserate together.

“Sort of step one in wetwork.” Clint answers bluntly, not really as helpful as he probably thinks he’s being.

“Assassination.” Natasha says more helpfully.

“Great.” Bruce’s eyes widen a little. They all know that both Clint and Natasha have done some unsavory things for SHIELD - and others - but it’s always a little awkward when it’s brought up directly. There’s no judgement there, at least not more than is fair, but likewise there isn’t really much you can say when someone reminds you that they used to murder people for a living. *That’s nice* doesn’t really cut it.

“It was one of my first gigs with SHIELD.” Clint explains. Tony knows he’d been with SHIELD since his late teens, so he guess that makes it the early nineties. “On complicated jobs they often assign a junior field agent to collect intel on a target. I had already shown a knack for getting in and out of tight places, so I was sent in. Did the job, reported to my handler.”

“But why did I shoot you?” Barnes asks again.

“To be honest I was kinda hoping you could tell me that.” Barton sighs. “All I know is they send me in for final checks, I’m crossing the street and the next thing I know there’s a bullet passing through my lung. I wake up, I’m told the target has been reassessed and the mission shelved. They passed me on to Coulson as soon as I was out of rehab. I liked what I was doing. I liked having a backup, so I did as I was told and I didn’t ask questions. It doesn’t mean much, but I’m sorry for that.” He looks genuinely regretful, but what difference would it really have made if he had asked questions? Barnes’ freedom, or lack of it, could hardly be blamed on the inaction of one inexperienced agent. But then how many others like Clint were there? How many genuine, honest SHIELD agents had come into contact with the Winter Soldier and either never known it or simply chosen to keep their mouths shut?

Barnes doesn’t respond to the apology. Instead he asks, “Who was the target?” From the look on Clint’s face that it’s a can of worms they really don’t want to be opening right now, but he is the only one who can keep a lid on it.

“Does it matter?” He asks, avoiding both the question and everyone’s gaze at the same time. Interesting, Tony thinks. Clint’s not an evasive guy by nature but he sure as hell doesn’t want any further prying into the particulars. Tony makes a mental note to do just that. He likes Clint, sure he does, but the last time he didn’t snoop as deeply as his instincts told him he should he missed the fact that one of the most dangerous intelligence agencies in the world was run by a deranged fascist.

Barnes’ lips form a thin line of displeasure but he doesn’t push any further.

“Who was your handler? They must have been HYDRA if they were reporting to the Winter Soldier.” Steve asks, his jaw tight. Anyone who thinks Captain America is not the kind of guy who is capable of revenge has clearly never read their war history. Tony’s been to the wing in the Smithsonian, he’s seen the info-graphics that are deemed suitable for the general public. He’s also read Roger’s sealed personal file. After Barnes had been supposedly killed in action, Steve had gone on a bloody-minded rampage right up to HYDRA’s front door. Captain America and the Howling Commandos always had a reputation for getting the job done, but their final assault on HYDRA had been something for the books. Tony had been raised on their exploits. They’d been the only bedtime stories Howard had ever told him.

“At the time it was Victor Francis, but he was KIA a year later.” Clint says apologetically.

“So we still have no idea who his handler was?” Steve asks angrily.

“You got nothing?” Bruce looks at Barnes, who shakes his head.

“Pierce is the only one who’s name I know.” He says, his voice rough as he speaks the name of the man who had kept him in torment. “When I woke up there were some doctors. A lot of soldiers. A STRIKE Team.” His gaze drifts off in remembrance.

“You wanna bet Rumlow was there?” Natasha says darkly. She and Steve share a loaded glance. She reaches into her back pocket, pulls out her phone and starts flipping through it with her thumb.

“What about that asshole?” There’s a surprising level of hostility in both Clint’s voice and his expression.

“He’s in the hospital still.” Steve says grimly. “We can go ask him.”

Clint doesn’t look impressed. “So he’s not dead? Pity.”

“Care to share with the class?” Tony asks, feeling left behind by the name of someone he’s had no interaction with. He doesn’t do well with being left behind. “What is a Rumlow?”

“He commanded STRIKE Team One.” Natasha says, speaking of the super shady guys who did SHIELDS dirty work. “The Cap and I worked with him a couple of times.”

“You worked with that dick?” Clint exclaims. “Nat!”

“They were orders!” Natasha says, just as heatedly. “What did you expect me to do, tell Fury to stick it?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” Clint scowls.

“That was different.” Natasha defends herself - which is new. Most of the time she’s utterly unapologetic about her actions, but with her SHIELD safety net ripped away so brutally, she’s clearly feeling far more defensive. Tony wonders if that’s something to do with Steve as well. He’s

the kind of guy who makes you feel bad for wanting to do bad things without ever expressing a single judgement. He's a hell of a figure to live up to. Tony should know, a part of him has always been in Steve's shadow. It's only now he knows the guy that he can find it in himself not to resent it.

"Okay, save it for couple's therapy." Tony butts in before they come to further blows, be they verbal or otherwise. He's curious to hear about Natasha telling Fury where to shove it, but that can wait for another time. "Rumlow. Sounds like a guy we need to be beating some answers out of."

Natasha seems to have found what she's looking for on her phone. She climbs to her feet and shows Barnes the screen. Tony can just about glimpse a SHIELD personnel file. "Look familiar?"

Barnes's gaze looks hollow and hurt. He reaches out and touches the screen, flicking through the rest of the details. "He was there." He admits softly. "I never knew his name."

They are all startled by the sound pried from Steve's throat. It's cold anger and burning rage condensed into one low growl that reverberates around the room. "Then let's go pay him a visit."

Bruce is the one to point out the elephant in the room, saving Tony the job. "For what purpose though? I'm sorry, I don't want to be the voice of doom, but if our friend's in as much trouble as you say then surely the best thing we can be doing is getting him someplace safe."

"Where?" Natasha asks. "There's no place in the world that HYDRA won't hunt him to. We need to be offensive here, Doc."

"Natasha is right." Steve agrees furiously. "We need to attack this at the source. We find out who is responsible and wipe them off the map."

"Or we don't kill them and they go to jail." Tony points out mildly. "Just putting another option out there."

"They don't deserve mercy for what they've done." Steve snarls. The anger and the hurt in his expression is so much more noticeable than it is on Barnes, and so much more disturbing. They don't know Barnes, they don't know what he was like or what he would have endorsed. From the stories Howard told him Tony knows Barnes never had a problem getting his hands dirty, but that was always for another cause - for Steve, for the war. He could have been backing Steve's revenge kick, he could have been talking him down. They don't know. They do know that somehow, if they aren't exceedingly careful, they are going to lose Steve to this. He preaches mercy and justice under every circumstance, for every enemy, even Loki. But not for this. Not for what's been done to Bucky.

"But if we find the people responsible for the actions the Winter Soldier took," Bruce offers gently, "the ones who made the calls and the ones who enforced them...we'd have a real shot at placing the blame where it belongs."

"You could be free of them." Natasha says compassionately. "The people need someone to blame for what happened? Then let's make sure they get the right ones this time."

It's a fragile, tentative hope, one that could see Barnes free to live the rest of his life out from under the shadow of the Winter Soldier. It's not quite a plan of attack, but it's halfway there.

Steve takes a steadying breath, his eyes flickering back over to Barnes. "Revenge can come later." He agrees firmly, "Bucky's safety is our priority."

"So let's go see this Rumlow. Are you gonna play nicely, Barton?" Tony interjects.

"It's doubtful." Clint shrugs.

Tony would ask what it is about the man that makes Barton dislike him so strenuously, but if he's the kind of guy involved in Barnes' treatment then that kind of says it all really. "Why exactly is he in hospital?"

"Third degree burns over sixty percent of his body." Natasha says with a grim, unpleasant smile.

"Ow." Tony grimaces. "That sounds horrible. Deserved, possibly. Probably. But still ow."

"You can thank Sam for that." Natasha says to Clint, her tone and her expression harder than usual. She's still pissed at him for being pissed at her. Tony has no idea how they even work but he bets it would make an absolutely fascinating sitcom.

"Who is this Sam I am hearing so much about?" He asks, picking up on the name that's been mentioned before.

"Sam Wilson. Codename Falcon." Natasha says.

"Dumbass codename." Clint doesn't look impressed. Tony sniggers.

"Don't get your feathers in a twist. You're still our favorite." He smirks. Barton flips him the finger. A bird flipping the bird. Tony's officially had too much caffeine.

"He'll be here soon. I'll let him fill you in on what he's been doing but let's just say we couldn't have taken SHIELD down without his help."

"Sounds like my kinda guy." Bruce says drolly.

"Ditto. I say we print him his team badge." Tony nods. "So, field trip to the hospital? I'll bring snacks."

"We can't just walk in." Steve points out.

Tony nods in agreement. "Agreed. *We* can't. You're well, you. You tend to attract a lot of attention."

"And you don't?" Steve exclaims incredulously.

"I do. But I also might have just this minute donated a rather large sum of money to their burns unit so I'm fairly sure they'll be up for giving me the tour."

"How'd you even know what hospital he's in?" Clint asks, finally dropping the scowl for something more amused.

Tony isn't impressed. Have they not seen him work before. He can be subtle and stealthy when he wants to be. "Uh, please. I also had JARVIS search through the back catalogue of all known HYDRA tech. Bucky, with your permission I'd like to suggest letting the good Doctor Banner here take a peek at that arm of yours, check for trackers, that kind of thing." They can't take Barnes with them and by extension they can't take Steve either. For one thing Barnes can't be left alone. For another Tony's not entirely sure Steve won't snap and take out his anger on the first valid target he sees. Tony doesn't want to have to step between that fight. He'd probably want to cheer Steve on. Best not to invite that kind of mess.

He can tell at once that Steve wants to protest but Tony stops him with a meaningful glance at

Barnes. Steve wants to do the right thing and protect his friend, this is how he starts.

“We’ll get you your answers.” Natasha promises them both. “Hang tight until Sam gets here. Hopefully he’ll have made some progress.”

Captain America is a soldier, one who leads from the front. He’s not used to being left behind. Captain America is not what Barnes needs.

He needs Steve.

“Raid my pantry while we’re gone. More mini-marshmallows.” Tony instructs. It feels strange, fracturing like this. He’s halfway out of the door, trailing Clint and Natasha, when he looks back to see Bruce standing by Barnes’ side, speaking to him low and soothing. Tony just about hears him ask, “What do you want to do?”

The door’s closing behind him, but Tony can just about catch the hesitant look Barnes gives Steve before he slowly pulls his shirt overhead, baring the bright flash of metal where his left arm should be.

The door closes and Tony jogs to catch up with Natasha and Clint. “So,” he says grimly, “how exactly are we going to ask our questions?”

Natasha’s smile is cold steel. “Nicely.” She says.

Clint’s expression matches. “Very nicely.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Is this where I admit that this is going to a loooooong story? Oops!

Much love and thanks to Titheniel for the magic editing touch xx

Tony drives. It's his car, of course he's going to drive. Besides, if he drives then one of them has to sit in the back and splitting up the scowling spies seems like a good idea right now. Natasha's in shotgun, casually flipping through her phone and reviewing the schematics of the hospital. Clint's in the back doing the same. They both make what they do look so easy and effortless that it's interesting to remember that ninety percent of what they do is preparation and planning. Knowing the layout of their target location, the numbers of staff members they are going to be encountering, exits, entrances, vantage points, it's all important. They make split second observations in the field if they have to, but both of them like to know what they walk into before they do it.

Speaking of..."So really, how are we going to get a trained mercenary slash soldier slash member of a super evil organization to spill his guts? Because believe it or not, I've never actually tortured someone before."

He hears Clint snort from the back. "You once spent four and a half hours talking engineering parables at me. What exactly do you call that?"

"Uh, filling in a vital gap in your education?" Tony says, which should be obvious. And it couldn't have been four and a half hours. Two and a half, maybe. Tops. "Speaking of, how many engineers does it take to change a lightbulb?" He can tell Natasha begrudges the effort she puts into her glare. "None, that's a hardware issue. Wow, tough crowd. Really though...torture. Is there like a guide book, some kind of etiquette I need to know about?"

Natasha laughs. "You sound nervous, Stark."

Tony wishes. "I think I'm more nervous by how not nervous I am. Aren't we supposed to be the good guys?" He swings back and forward between being happy to let Natasha and Clint chop off a few fingers - if that's what they're planning on doing, who the hell knows really? - and feeling really damn nauseous about the whole thing. And guilty, because he promised Steve they'd get answers. And confused, because how exactly has he reached the point in his life where he's driving two super spies to go torture a man who is already in hospital?

"We're not going to torture him, Tony." Clint says, his voice surprisingly soothing. "Rumlow's a dick but he's also an egotistical sadist. He'll tell us everything we want to know."

"Why? HYDRA don't exactly seem like the most forthright of folks."

"They hate Steve." Natasha says softly, "and they are proud of what they did to Bucky."

"And he'll get a kick out of spilling all the gory details, my god I hate people sometimes." Tony sighs. Traffic is a bitch and he drums his fingers on the wheel. They should have some kind of siren, Official Avengers Business, get out of my lane, that sort of thing.

“People are the worst.” Clint agrees. “How’d you think Steve’s holding up?”

“As well as he can, I guess.”

“It’s going to get worse.” Clint says seriously. Tony can see his eyes in the rearview mirror and they are dark with his own demons. “If he does start getting his memories back. It’s going to get a whole lot worse.”

Natasha glances at Tony, her gaze assessing, then reaches behind her to the back seat and curls her fingers around Clint’s. It’s the first actual evidence Tony has that they might be a little more than co-workers who hang out and save the world together, but since the gesture has only been made in the face of Barton’s trauma, Tony doesn’t say anything about it.

He’s also afraid Clint’s right, but he’s starting to accept it as inevitable. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t walk away now. The fallout of this, when it starts to really hit, is going to need all hands on deck to contain.

“HYDRA will make us the second we walk into the building, that’s if they don’t already know we are coming.” Natasha says, turning their attention back to the mission at hand. “We need to make it in and out as quickly as possible. The longer we are there the more chance there is of them trying to restrict our access. We want to avoid violence if we can.”

“I am all for avoiding violence.” Tony agrees. “Except, you know, when I’m not.”

“Do you even have your suit?” Clint frowns at him through the mirror.

“You’re riding in it, Katniss.” Tony pats the wheel fondly. He’s been experimenting with ways to make the suits more portable, more containable...but less auspicious. Besides, after ruining so many cars over the course of the years he feels it’s only fair that he brings them into the fold. A flick of a button and his suit assembles out of the trunk. He just has to remember that when he lets Pepper take him shopping. It kinda eats up storage space.

Clint shakes his head and grins. Natasha simply rolls her eyes, though Tony would like to think that it’s with a little more fondness than usual.

The rest of the drive passes in silence until they finally pull up in front of the hospital. JARVIS has already called ahead to inform the head of staff of their arrival, and there’s even a couple of paps waiting. This is New York and news travels even faster than he can.

He fixes on his best Tony Stark face and throws open the car door. “Show time, boys and girls.”

“Mr Stark! This is...very generous...so unexpected...with we’d had more time to...” The hospital’s head of staff is a short, stocky man in his mid-fifties. He stumbles over his words as he greets them. He holds out a hand and flashes Tony a beaming smile that quickly wilts under Clint’s unflinching glare. They are playing this good cop, bad cop and eccentric billionaire. Clint’s scowl is strong enough to reduce even the most stalwart of men to a quivering mess, and Natasha’s smile is just as devastating.

“Mr-“ Tony starts.

“Doctor.” He provides.

“Sanders.” Natasha adds in an overly loud whisper. Tony knows the man’s name, but they’ve played this role before and it never hurts to keep the power of the conversation on his side of the court.

“Doctor Sanders.” Tony tries again. “Great hospital, happy to donate, big smile -“ He angles the stunned man around for a quick candid, “now how about a tour?”

Sanders starts to hesitate, “A tour? Wouldn’t you rather speak to the board?”

“I don’t even speak to my own board.” Tony says. “I hear you’re doing excellent things with pro-polymer skin grafts. Let’s talk about that. In detail.” He catches the subtle way Clint rolls his eyes and grins. With his arm thrown casually over Sander’s back, Tony steers them inside, flanked by a smiling Natasha - who is almost as famous as he is these days - and a glaring Clint. No one is crazy enough to stop them, but Tony spots the men and women in the corridors, loitering or giving the appearance of work. He’s learned how to spot an undercover operative from Natasha fucking Romanov and now they all stand out like sore thumbs.

SHIELD, or HYDRA, would have never dreamed of using a civilian hospital for such a prolonged period of time had Steve not crashed a helicarrier or two (or three but who’s counting?) into their main base of operations, and Natasha outed the other city safe houses on the internet. The fact that Rumlow is not only still being treated, but still alive and under protection, says a lot about where he fits into the HYDRA hierarchy. Even if he’s not up top with the decision makers, he’s still considered valuable to them. Now that their Washington foothold has vanished and their existence revealed to the world, HYDRA need their most valuable assists more than ever. There’s no possible way they won’t be coming for Barnes, and soon. They already know they can just scrub his memory clean and start from a blank slate. All it will take is for Barnes to fall into their hands long enough for them to wipe him and they are back to square one.

There’s a silent understanding that passes between Tony, Natasha and Clint. One that says they will do every damn thing in their power to make sure that doesn’t happen. One that says if it did, if the worst case scenario became real and the Winter Soldier was once more a threat, one they couldn’t save, then Steve won’t have to be the one to end his friend’s life. Tony doesn’t want to think about that happening. He can hardly bear it. He’s also learned he can’t bury his head in the sand, no matter how much he might want to.

Tony starts to regret the ‘in detail’ part of his suggestion about five minutes in, when Sanders is pointing out the new and improved vending machines that have only recently been installed.

They are taking a risk by doing this. By now HYDRA will know they are there. Tony is sure they won’t be stupid enough to try anything in such a public place, but their motivations for visiting a recovering HYDRA operative will be under question as soon as they enter Rumlow’s room.

By the time they enter the burn unit, even Natasha’s smile is strained and Clint’s started to twitch his fingers the way he does when he’s thinking about shooting someone. There’s a compact compound bow and a dozen collapsable arrows hidden in the compartment built into his jacket. Tony designed it one weekend shortly after New York, when he decided that yes, bows and arrows are a lot cooler than he has given them credit for, but also seriously impractical. And kinda illegal to carry around on the streets of New York. Clint had been misty eyed over them for about a week, to such an extent that Natasha had actually thanked him.

“Yes,” Tony says in response to something very boring and irrelevant announced by Sanders, “but see, it really is the patients that I’m interested in and you know I’d love to meet some of them, see how you’re gonna put my million dollars to use, hey, how about this one?” Natasha is the one who has given him the nod, indicating that she’s located Rumlow’s room. As soon as Tony sees it he knows that it’s the one.

There aren’t any obvious security measures in place, nothing that would indicate that the patient inside is any more important than any of the others. It’s the nurse down the hall who has been

studying the same file for too long, the cleaner who isn't cleaning properly, the tired, frustrated looking man sat a little too stiffly on one of the chairs outside.

"I'm afraid not, Mr Stark." Sanders says regretfully. "This patient is in a very delicate condition. I would be remiss in my duty to allow him visitors at this point." His hesitancy confirms it.

"That's ridiculous." Tony scoffs. "I'm Iron Man. Everyone loves a visit from Iron Man. Come on, it'll cheer him up." Tony bulldozers his way through the stuttered protests Sanders emits and levers his way through the door. Sanders, helpless, shakes his head at one of the guards on duty, desperately not wanting to cause a scene. Tony wonders how much HYDRA have invested in the hospital. Probably nothing. Why part with money when they can get what they want through intimidation instead? He has JARVIS run checks on the hospital's financials, and on Sanders'. If there is anything they need to worry about, it will be flagged up.

Natasha closes the door behind them and pulls a canister out of her pocket. "Doctor Sanders?" She asks, catching his attention. He turns to her and she empties the contents of the canister in his face.

The reaction is instant. He goes down and is caught by Clint, who dumps him none too gently on one of the visitor's chairs.

"We've got five minutes." Clint says as he checks Sanders' pulse.

"Is that enough?" Tony asks.'

"I only need three." Natasha says coolly, moving over to the bed with dangerous intent.

Rumlow's a mess of slowly healing burns and sticky looking bandage wraps. He's conscious but clearly drugged to the gills and it takes a second for his eyes to focus on them. They fall on Natasha first, then Clint. He opens his mouth to speak but is silenced by the press of Clint's hand. His fingers dig into the burns on his cheek and Tony can see the dull shot of pain flare in Rumlow's eyes. Natasha fiddles with the IVs he's hooked to, cutting the painkillers off at the source.

"Inside voices, Brock." Clint says to their captive audience. "Understood?"

Rumlow nods his head as much as he can and Barton removes his hand. "What the hell are you doing here?" He demands, his voice thick with the effects of the drugs.

"The Winter Soldier." Natasha says, jumping right into things. "What do you know about him?"

Rumlow looks genuinely confused. "What the hell do you care?"

"He's trying to kill us." Natasha says. Tony keeps his expression schooled. Interesting. She's the master manipulator of their little gang, so Tony's not about to interrupt, but he's a little surprised that she'd leading Rumlow to think Barnes is still under the influence of his brainwashing. In the long run, that could help them, especially if HYDRA underestimates him.

Rumlow actually laughs, or tries to. "And you're still alive? He must be losing his touch."

"Not through lack of trying." Natasha growls. "Tell me about him."

"You're dead, Black Widow." Rumlow coughs, his burned, scarred face twisting into a hideous parody of a smirk. "Once the Soldier has you in his sights there is no escape. One way or another, he will kill you."

"He's never failed?" Natasha pushes, playing more dumb than Tony can ever believe her to be.

He's seen it happen multiple times, even with people who should know better. No matter how many times her competency and deviousness kicks people in the ass, she bats those pretty eyes and they fall for her tricks all over again. It's a superpower worth having, that's for sure.

"Never." Rumlow says. "He's given a target, he eliminates it. That's what he does. That's all he does. It's his only reason for existence."

"Then who is he working for? Pierce is dead." Clint demands. Tony's happy to let them lead on this, happy to just observe. Clint was right, they would never have been able to force information out of Rumlow, but he sure does like the sound of his own voice. Natasha's expression is a perfect mask of hurt, worry and fear, and Tony can tell he likes having that power over her. Idiot.

"He doesn't belong to Pierce. He belongs to HYDRA. The mission is the only thing he knows."

"Then where do we find him?" Natasha demands. "How do we stop him?"

"You can't stop him." Rumlow laughs again. Tony thinks it's fitting that he's not tried to move against them once. Even with the drugs he must be in boatloads of pain. Good. "He's the perfect weapon."

"He's just a man." Natasha says. "A man can be stopped."

"He's not a man. He's not even human. He's a thing, an attack dog on a leash. If there was ever anything more to him then we burned that out a long time ago. Although..." He eyes Natasha with a cruel smile, "he did seem pretty interested in our friend the Cap. First time I ever heard him talk. Would have thought they'd taken his tongue as well as his arm if he didn't scream so damn much during the wipes."

Tony's rapidly reevaluating his stance on murder. It doesn't matter that Barnes is Steve's best friend, it doesn't matter that they've damn near adopted him into their weird little family. No one deserves that kind of inhumane treatment, and to hear someone talk about it so easily, with such pleasure...

Natasha's expression doesn't falter. Tony has to admire her for that. He knows her well enough to know she wants to kill Rumlow, slow and drawn out. She puts Steve and Barnes' needs before her own desires and continues on. "What are you talking about? How does he know Steve?"

"They're old friends, apparently." Rumlow laughed. "Or they were, back in the day. Kept asking about the Cap, wanted to know who 'the man on the bridge' was. It was pathetic, for someone to have that much power and just lay back and take it like he did." His expression shifts from disgust back to cruel enjoyment. "We had one hell of a time wiping him after that. Still, he may have super human endurance, but it's not unlimited. We got there in the end, gave him his last mission, to stamp you out of existence."

"Tell us how to stop him." Natasha pushes, trying to steer the conversation in a more informative direction.

"Aren't you listening? You can't. HYDRA will win. He'll hunt you down and when he's done with you he'll do what he does every time. He'll walk back into the bank like a good little dog and let us do it all over again. You can't break the cycle. We will always win."

Natasha draws up, her triumph confined to her eyes. "So you kept him in a bank." She announces, dropping the pretense like a dead weight. "Stark?"

Tony's already on it, scrolling through maps and plans of DC on his StarkTablet, looking for any

possible locations. It had to be out of public use to avoid suspicion, but likewise somewhere where activity wouldn't be questioned. They'd need a vault to secure Barnes in, and if the procedure was as painful as Rumlow made it sound it would have to be soundproof...probably underground. His search brought up seventeen possibilities. He narrowed out any beyond the main city borders, then crosschecked their power usage with the dates Natasha and Steve had encountered the Winter Soldier. If they wiped him then as well then they'd have needed some serious juice.

One answer came up. "801 17th Street." Tony announces, looking up to clock Rumlow's reaction. His expression shutters. Bingo. "Alrighty then, shall we?"

"What?" Rumlow asks, confused. "What are you -"

"You're a fucking idiot, Brock." Clint shakes his head and punches him hard in the side of the jaw. "What?" he asks, looking up innocently. "He is!"

Rumlow's out cold, which is a good thing because Sanders stirs and stumbles to his feet. "What... what just happened?"

Tony shakes his hand vigorously. "You have an excellent facility here, you must be so proud. My people will call your people about, I don't really know. Whatever, we'll be in touch. Thanks for the tour."

They exit calmly, right out the front door. Tony waves for the photographers, Natasha manages a smile, and when pressed Clint flashes a blinding grin that will keep the good folks of US Weekly happy for a good couple of hours. "You should really smile more." Tony tells him, gunning the engine. "It brings out your latent psychosis."

Clint rolls his eyes and ignores him, instead saying, "Well it's not a name."

"It's a start." Tony corrects. "You up for field trip to D.C.?"

"That's four hours away." Natasha points out mildly.

"I'm a fast driver." Tony grins. "How long do you think Rumlow will be out?"

"The way Clint hits?" Natasha smirks. "Couple'a hours."

"Field trip it is then." Tony grins, suddenly flush with the idea of finding that bank and ripping it to the ground brick by brick. And if there are any HYDRA agents still there? More the better. His smile feels sharp and nasty on his face, twisted that way by the utter disgust he felt for the way Rumlow had talked about Bucky's treatment. He has his phone dial Steve and put the call on speaker.

"*What did he tell you?*" Steve asks, forgoing greetings in favor of information.

"We got a location on where they were holding him." Tony says, saving the wisecracks in the face of Steve's obvious distress. "We're headed there now."

"Be careful." Steve says. "HYDRA could still be active there."

"Mood I'm in right now that's not exactly an issue." Tony says honestly. "How's he doing?"

He can hear Steve sigh. "He's still with Bruce. Looks like they kept him pretty well dosed on vitamins and supplements over the years, so he's catching up on the stuff he's missed the last few weeks."

“Good. That’s good.” Tony nods. “Any bombshells with that arm of his?”

“Bruce found a tracker but it’s not active. He’s still running diagnostics.” Steve says.

“What about you? How you holding up?”

Steve grimaces. “I’ve not killed anyone yet.” He says, as if that is all they can really ask of him.

“Good job. Points for effort. Look, we’ll call you when we get to D.C.”

“Right.” Steve nods. “Watch your backs.”

Tony ends the call and the vehicle lapses into silence. It passes that way for about thirty miles, with all three of them lost in their own thoughts. It’s Clint that breaks it.

“Then what?” He asks. “Say it’s still there when we get there. Say HYDRA haven’t already emptied it. What then?”

“So long as their databanks are still connected to the grid I can tap in from there.” Tony says. “Anything archived I can work with. Surveillance footage, medical notes. It’ll all help.”

“Then what?” Clint asks again, half way between petulant teen and worried spook.

“Then we take a lot of valium and see what the intel can tell us.”

“That’ll be fun.” Natasha grimaces. The last thing any of them want to do is watch that kind of footage.

“Hence the valium.” Tony points out.

“What do we tell Steve?” Clint asks the question that no one wants to raise. “Did he know that Barnes started to remember him before they wiped him again?”

Natasha shakes her head sadly. It’s possibly the cruelest thing Tony has ever heard done to someone and he aches desperately for the damage it caused. By the sounds of it, the last wipe Barnes had been subjected to had been more brutal than usual and the damage more pronounced. He wonders how further along they would be with Barnes’ healing if they’d not taken that blossoming memory from him.

“No. He didn’t know.” She says.

“Do we tell him?” Clint asks.

They should. Steve has a right to know. Barnes has a right to know. But...

...but right now they are in enough pain. Knowing won’t change that.

“No.” Tony says. “Not yet.” Steve’ll find out eventually, and Tony will shoulder the consequences of that when he does. Until then, if this is the only thing they can do to protect their friends from even more pain, then they’ll do it, consequences be damned.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Titheniel has once more worked her editorial magic (and reminded me I'm not actually as bloodthirsty as I think I am)

You can find me at [here](#) if you want to come drown in feels with me on tumblr!

Also just a heads up: I have an insanely busy work schedule ahead so it's possible updates might not be managed every day this week. I'll do my best!

They make it to D.C. in record time, thanks in part to Tony's driving. The traffic is not as bad once they make it out of the city and they gain ground by allowing JARVIS to guide them through the less congested routes.

It's actually a decent trip. Though they start in broody silence, Natasha decides fairly early on that Clint's silent is a little *too* broody. She makes a comment to him in an Eastern European language that Tony knows isn't Russian, and Clint glares at her before starting to laugh. From there on she seems to take great pleasure in pushing his buttons, muttering odd little words that have Clint in absolute stitches. Tony's never really considered Natasha Romanov as someone with a particularly wicked sense of humor, but after seeing her reduce Barton to silent tears of laughter in the back seat, he figures he needs to reevaluate her skills as a comic. Barton doesn't make much sound as he laughs, mostly gasped little wheezes that don't have time to become anything more or less with Natasha's brutal teasing.

Tony starts out bemused, not having a clue what she is saying to him. Then it just gets to the point where the content doesn't really matter. Barton's reaction is funny enough in itself to make Tony join in.

"That," Clint wheezes, struggling to catch his breath, "was evil."

Natasha looks supremely smug.

"Who knew you were funny, Romanov?" Tony chuckled.

She shoots him a withering glare. "I'm hysterical." She says, utterly deadpan. That just makes Clint start laughing again.

"I'm stuck in a car with a spy who moonlights as standup comedian." Tony mutters to himself. "How did this become my life?"

"It's called karma." Barton sniggers.

"Ugh, don't I know it." Tony moans.

It's early afternoon by the time they arrive in the city and there are a hell of a lot more security checks in place than Tony's ever seen before. That might have something to do with the super secret evil nazi sect recently uncovered in the seat of American democracy, or it could be a mismanagement of public funding. In D.C. it's always hard to tell.

Their plan of attack upon arriving at the bank, which from the outside seems so innocuous and dull, is fairly simple.

Tony half abandons, half parks the car outside the front entrance and before the well dressed man posing as a bank employee has chance to do more than throw open the doors, Clint's put an arrow through his throat.

Like Natasha, he's always armed. Like Natasha, he's itching to break something.

The trunk opened the moment the car stopped, and Tony only has to walk two paces from the driver's door before he's being encased in warm metal and thrumming power.

He is Iron Man, and Iron Man is him, but there is something almost comforting about the way the final piece of the suit snaps over his face, allowing him some much needed distance as he, Black Widow and Hawkeye walk calmly through the front door.

It's well guarded, and clearly still operational. Tony wonders how many more sites like this never made it onto the SHIELD servers, how many more little pockets of hell there are stashed around the city.

Unlike the hospital, where subtlety (kinda) and finesse (Natasha's at least) were the keys, there's nothing remotely stealthy about their actions. As far as Tony is concerned HYDRA declared war against the Avengers sixty-eight years ago and this has just been a battle a long time in the making. Official or not, Steve is their leader. This is personal.

Tony lets Natasha and Clint deal with the units on the ground. Clint had snatched one of his precious few arrows right back out of the throat he'd fired it into, and that's a pattern he continues.

Their enemy has guns. They don't get to use them.

This is the first time Tony's seen Natasha and Barton fight together as a pair. They are swift, they are brutal, and the men they are up against don't stand a chance.

Still, some of them are stupid enough to fire on Tony as he marches towards the vaults. The bullets deflect with ringing pings of colliding metals, as ineffective as flies against a tank.

The vault door is heavy, solid. Thick enough to slow down even someone of Barnes' strength. There is only one entrance, and Tony blasts his way right through it.

There are only a few soldiers inside, and they require little effort to dispatch. Mostly there are scientists, doctors...people who should know better than anyone how precious and valuable a life is. It's no wonder Rumlow spoke of Barnes like he wasn't even a person when these men and women clearly treated him as so much less.

The vault isn't overly bright, but it's not cast in shadows either. It is, however, filled with the type of equipment that makes Tony feel a little queasy. There's a surgical chair set just off center, surrounded by banks of monitors. It's equipped with mechanized, heavy duty restraints - ones that are presumably designed to keep someone of Barnes' strength contained. Given what an emphasis Rumlow put on the Winter Soldier's obedience, Tony can only presume they are there to counter the seizures. You can't mess around with someone's head like that and not expect the body to trigger some strong defenses.

The doctors cower as Tony marches inside, their hands placating and the fear in their eyes palpable.

Did Barnes ever look at them like that? Did they care?

Why should he?

“Is this...?” Clint starts, his eyes on the set up as he arrives at Tony’s side. His hands are bruised but utterly steady and his eyes are razor sharp. He’s got a full stash of arrows again, and they drip with blood. Natasha arrives a second later.

“Exit’s secure.” She reports, then her eyes fall on the chair and she swears softly in her mother tongue.

Tony can’t help the shudder that races up his spine. It’s utterly barbaric.

“I guess so.” He says in response to Barton. He turns back to the cowering scientists. “Who’s in charge here?” He demands. When no answers are forthcoming, Clint strings his bow and fires an arrow into one of their feet. The man falls to the ground and howls, clutching his leg, but still no one has the courage to step forward.

They look pathetic, afraid and spineless, and in that second Tony hates them more than he hates Rumlow and Pierce. Sadists like them can’t cause half the damage they do without men and women like these to make it possible.

It’s a good thing Steve isn’t here. Tony has to remind himself of that. Steve isn’t here. He’s not seeing this.

“Stark,” Natasha snaps, pulling him out of his blinding hatred. It’s only then he realizes she’s been trying to talk to him. “How long with the computers?”

Tony shakes off the fog of hate and storms over to the data banks. There’s a dozen of them, too much data to download remotely, not without taking hours of time. He turns back to the scientists. “Do you have transport?” He demands. Clint strings another arrow at their silence.

“There’s a van out back.” One eventually has the balls to say. Natasha nods and heads out to investigate while Tony begins the job of dismantling the servers. Clint’s on watch, so he’s not worried, but they need to be moving quickly before more HYDRA agents arrive.

The same man who spoke the first time pipes up again. “You can’t take those!” He protests. “They represent seventy years of data, you have no right!”

Tony scoffs. “I’ve got all the damn right I need.” He says in disgust. Seventy years worth of data. Is it too much to hope that he’s got his hands on everything pertaining to the Winter Soldier?

Natasha returns as Tony is done disconnecting the databanks, and she’s brought with her a loading cart. They set about loading the machines, a job made easier by the suit.

“How long did you keep him here?” Barton demands, not even the slightest tremble in his arms though he’s had tension on the bowstring for several minutes. People underestimate him and Natasha, the two no-super superheroes on the team. They have no idea how physically strong both of them are - and how mentally resilient. “How long?” Barton demanded again, his voice rising in heated anger.

“This facility has been in use for nine years.” The one scientist responds.

A decade, almost. They kept Barnes here for almost a decade. Not in some cold, dirty, disease ridden hole in the ground in a place so far away from civilization you could be forgiven for not knowing its existence, but in a bank vault in Washington D.C.

“Where did he sleep?” Barton asks. “You kept him here for ten years...where did he sleep?”

Tony pauses in what he is doing and follows the scientist’s reluctant gaze towards what he had mistakenly believed was a cooling unit propped up against the far wall of the vault.

He can only laugh bitterly at his mistake. He’s not entirely wrong. It is a cooling unit of a sort. It’s a cryo tank.

Tony understands what he’s been told before. That they kept Barnes on ice between missions. That they wiped him after every one.

It’s a little different seeing it up close and personal.

It’s very different knowing that the only two constant things in Barnes’ life were that tank and the chair.

“You kept him in there? Like he’s a piece of meat.” Tony shakes his head in disbelief.

It’s clear that the scientists have twigged to the fact that they are less interested in stealing the secrets to the Winter Soldier, and more concerned with the man himself. Their fear only increases, and one helplessly pleads, “We were just doing as we were told. It wasn’t personal!”

The rage is back, cold and deadly. He leaves Natasha to load the last machine onto the cart and storms over to the scientists. They scatter and pull away, trying to escape his anger, but Tony seizes the one who spoke up by the throat and hauls him across the room to the tank.

He knows exactly what he’s doing as he opens the lid. He doesn’t regret it when the man starts to thrash and howl in panic. He just dumps him inside and slams it closed. He does’t trigger the program, but he does engage the lock. “It’s nothing personal.” Tony hisses. “Romanov?”

“I’m good.” Natasha says, the last machine loaded. Tony nods abruptly and uses the suit’s strength to propel the cart from the vault.

“Let’s go.” Tony’s words have become clipped and short. He’s afraid of what he’ll do or say if he has to try and string more than a few words together at a time.

“What about them?” Barton asks, just itching to shoot one of them.

“Load the van.” Natasha orders, “I got this.”

Tony hesitates, but it’s a small, pointless thing. “Are you going to kill them?” He asks her.

Her voice is soft, only a whisper. “Yes.”

Clint’s smile is as sharp as it is nasty as he leaves her to it. Tony can’t bring himself to smile, but he can’t bring himself to stop her either. They deserve it. They all deserve it. Whatever it says about him that he’s willing to let it happen...he’ll add it to the pile of other ugly things that’s building up in his head.

It doesn’t take her long. She’s quick, merciful. It’s probably even painless. More than Tony can say for what they did to Barnes. When she’s done, they step around the bodies of the men and women they came through on the way in. They leave no survivors. He’s seen battle before, but this possibly the first time Tony’s ever felt like he’s in a war.

“You two stick together.” Natasha says, “I’ll drive the van.”

Tony doesn't argue. He knows Natasha doesn't want Clint driving alone any more than she wants Tony doing the same. She's safe in her own headspace, Barton is not, and Tony knows he's unpredictable at best. Better to keep the variables limited.

Tony loads the van and checks it for trackers, finding three and destroying them before the suit packs itself away into the trunk, nice and neat.

The drive back is nowhere near as enjoyable. Barton doesn't say a word the whole time and Tony, who barely takes his eyes off the van Natasha is driving directly in front of him, very nearly gets them into a wreck more than once.

Four hours later and his anger is still a physical, tangible thing. He leaves the car parked outside the tower and directs the techs who rush out to meet them to transport the databanks to his labs immediately.

There's no question that Natasha and Clint are coming up to the penthouse with him. Tony's not sure if seeing Barnes is going to calm them down or make things worse. They won't know until they arrive.

He's stilled from making a grand entrance by the soft sound of music drifting from inside. He glances over at Natasha, who shrugs.

"Didn't think this was your kinda thing, Stark." Clint says, eyebrows raised.

"It's not," Tony responds, stepping across the threshold. "Hey JARVIS, what's with the classical music?" Tony asks, looking around the room. It's not even the type of music Steve sometimes likes to listen to when he's feeling nostalgic.

"I believe it is Sergei Rachmaninoff, sir. Prelude in G Minor, to be exact."

"That's great. Why are you playing it?"

"I am not, sir." JARVIS says, just as Tony spots the source of the music. Even without being told, Tony would have put the origins as Russian. It's an incredibly expressive piece of work, and he's stunned to see Barnes sat at the grand piano, playing like he's been doing so his whole life.

There's something utterly hypnotic about the way Barnes plays. He's clearly lost in the music, playing from rote, not memory, as his fingers dance over the keys with a will of their own. He looks like he had done in the shower - relaxed, serene. Not happy, there's no pretending he looks anything remotely close, but the shadows in his eyes are a little less pronounced.

It makes Tony forget, however briefly, the terabytes of data he's going to spend the rest of the night wading through. It makes him forget the cold, terrifying box Barnes had been locked in, and the cruel chair they had strapped him into before they tore apart his mind. He just looks like a man, playing the piano.

But it is Steve who holds the most of Tony's attention. If Barnes is playing like the music is the only thing in his world, Steve is looking at him like Barnes is the only thing in Steve's world. There's as much desperation in his eyes as there is hope, as much longing as there is joy. The look passes, and Steve heads outside onto the balcony.

"I did not expect that." Tony hears Clint say, still focused on Steve's retreating form. "So what, HYDRA sent him undercover as a concert pianist?"

"No," And dammit, Tony needs to do better at this, People can't just sneak up on him all the time.

Bruce shifts his weight, having snuck over from the kitchen to glance at Barnes. Natasha settles down to listen, her chin propped up on her hand. Clint picks up her bag and heads in the direction of Tony's lab. He seems less able to shake off the fugue that hangs around him like smog. "Apparently this is something he could do before they got their hands on him."

"Impressive," Natasha nods, "how long's he been at it?"

"About an hour." Bruce shrugs. "It was just a couple of notes at first, then a few melodies, a couple of bridges...then he just sits down and belts out Liszt."

"I didn't even know that thing was tuned." Tony shakes his head. He can play, but he gets very little enjoyment out of it, so mostly it sits untouched.

He tells Bruce they'll catch up in a few minutes, both interested and apprehensive to hear what conclusions he's drawn from his tests. First, Tony wants to talk to Steve.

The music, fluid and beautiful, is a good sign, clearly?

He can still see Steve out on the balcony. Barnes has his back to him, but Tony knows the music can be heard loud and clear out there. The acoustics of the room are perfect.

He bounds outside excitedly, eager to see a hopeful smile on Steve's face or a happy gleam in his eyes. After what he's seen today, he needs it.

He's utterly unprepared to get closer and see Steve's shoulders shaking, his arms braced and his head bowed.

He's sobbing, silently but with a force that is leaving hand sized dents in the railing he is leaning on.

Tony has no idea what to say, what to do. He's never been good at things like this, at being careful with the emotions of other people. With Pepper it's different, she's almost part of him they are so in tune. The doesn't help him now, and he is suddenly terrified that he's going to mess this up and make it worse.

"Steve," he tries, hand coming to rest gently on Steve's shoulder, "buddy..." There's so much strength coiled under Tony's hand, so much power, but it's no protection against the wounds that are seeded deep into Steve's enormous heart.

The misery on Steve's face is heartbreaking. The melody drifts to them on the breeze and Steve's expression crumples further.

If this talent for music was something Barnes had shown before HYDRA had taken him, Tony can just imagine the memories it was invoking for Steve, who had known him for so long. Tony wonders if Barnes had played for him, *what* he might have played for him.

"I'm okay." Steve chokes, scrubbing a hand over his face as he tries to clear away the evidence of his tears.

"You're not." Tony says gently, "you don't have to be."

"I do." Steve shakes his head.

Tony could argue with him until he was blue in the face and it would do no good. He tries to get Steve to focus on the good things instead. "He's not bad." He says, nodding his head towards

Barnes inside.

“He’s brilliant.” Steve admits. “He used to play the music halls. Can’t sing to save his life, but he had a talent for the piano like I never heard. Used to play these stupid little songs after closing. The girls loved him.”

“Yeah,” Tony smiles, “I bet they did.” Barnes is a handsome man under that wild hair and tormented gaze. He must have been even more so as a carefree kid.

It takes Tony a second to notice that the music has stopped. He and Steve both turn, Steve rubbing his hand over his face as he goes.

Barnes is officially the stealthiest guy Tony knows, and he hangs out with Natasha and Clint. He doesn’t make a sound when he moves and is so graceful it’s down right spooky. As always, his gaze is only for Steve, who does a poor job of hiding the fact that he’d been sobbing his heart out only moments ago.

“I’m sorry.” Barnes says, and he sounds genuine, like seeing Steve in pain hurts him in return. There’s no doubting these two deserve one another, the way they react so strongly to the other’s distress. What must they have been like when Barnes actually knew the man he felt so protective of?

“Don’t be sorry, Buck.” Steve says firmly. “Don’t ever be sorry.”

“You want me to stop?” He asks, a glance back at the piano not hiding the longing in his eyes. Tony doesn’t doubt for a second that if Steve wished it, Barnes would never touch the thing again. They’re seriously damn lucky that Barnes has chosen to attach himself to someone as pure-hearted and unselfish as Steve.

Steve shakes his head, smiling sadly. “I’ve always loved listening to you play.”

Barnes nods slowly then returns inside. A few moments later there’s a soft, sweet melody playing on the breeze. It’s gentle and soothing, meant to calm and relax. It does the job perfectly. Steve squares his shoulders and looks over at Tony, all business. “So what did you find?” He asks.

Tony shakes his head and pulls Steve over to one of the loungers and sitting, dragging both of them down. “It can wait.” Tony promises, letting the music wash over them both.

He half expects Steve to protest. He doesn’t.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Whoops, this part got a little exposition heavy, so sorry! We'll be back to our scheduled feels shortly.

Vast helpings of love and hugs must once more go to Titheniel, who not only edits but puts up with me when I fail to do as simple a thing as link to my tumblr. I'm not even going to try be fancy this time :p

HERE --> boopboopbi.tumblr.com
Have fun!

“Talk to me Science Brother.” Tony exclaims as he enters the lab and spots Bruce already hooking up the databanks. He’s left Steve up on the balcony under the direct supervision of Natasha and Pepper, who has returned from fixing things only to instantly fall in love with Barnes’ musical prowess. Turns out she’s the one who keeps the piano tuned in the hopes of someday convincing Tony that he wants to play again. There’s little luck of that ever happening but he doesn’t feel so bad about it now she has someone else to be enraptured by. Steve hadn’t said a word the entire time they were sat together, and Tony doubts Steve even noticed when he got up and left.

It’s for this reason more than any other, that Tony has the entire building put on lockdown. JARVIS has eyes on the sky and a one hundred floor level protocol security system in place. The top thirty floors of the building were under Tony’s direct control. The remaining seventy operate on a strict needs must policy. Workers are allowed in their departments and their departments only. Overtime is cancelled and all admission requests go directly to Pepper, who is ready to knock back anyone who isn’t Sam Wilson, who Steve and Natasha are still waiting on. He might let Fury in if he asks real nicely. You’d need an army to invade the tower, and with Maria Hill the new brains behind security, Tony isn’t worried about unauthorized access slipping past the net.

He is more worried about his teammates getting caught off guard. A good fight might help settle Steve’s nerves, but not if he is caught off guard, not in the mood he is in now.

Besides, they’ve promised Barnes that this is a safe place.

Right now that’s all Tony can give him.

Bruce is back in his home turf, plowing on with his work in that quietly dependable way of his. That’s how he deals with stress and upset. Much like Tony really. They lose themselves in their work. “Not if you insist on calling me that.” He says absently. He’s on his hands and knees as he fiddles, and doesn’t stop at Tony’s arrival. “Hand me that extension?” He holds out his hand expectantly and Tony obliges.

“Fine. Squelch on my affectionate naming of our bromance. Please Doctor Banner, enlighten me with your brilliant brilliance.” Tony says instead.

Bruce looks up from his spot on the floor and raises an eyebrow. “You’re in a bad mood.”

“That obvious?” Tony sighs. He thought he was more subtle than that. Subtlety’s not really his thing, but he’d thought he could fake it better than this. You think that after a couple of hours of listening to some of the most beautiful pieces of music - performed by someone who played them from the soul - that his epically bad mood would dissipate. It hasn’t.

“You’re more obnoxious when you’re upset.” Bruce shrugs. It’s a little scary how well these people have come to know him, despite not really spending huge amounts of time together. Must be one of those life and death, save the world and eat schwarma kinda things.

“Bite your tongue, I’m always obnoxious.” Tony says, not quite ready to let go of the coiling frustration that’s building up once more.

“I said *more*. What happened in D.C.?” Bruce climbs out from under the desk and cracks a kink out of his neck.

Tony has a fleeting moment of shame when he thinks about it, one that’s quickly replaced by anger and confusion. He doesn’t regret what he’s done, but he doesn’t like it either. He’s not told Steve yet, though he knows he will. Steve won’t care if they are dead, which says a whole lot about where his head is at right now. Rogers is a soldier and he’s got no problem with killing people if that’s what the job requires, but not with taking the easy way out. Tony’s still not sure if killing those people was the easy way or not. He might not ever be.

“We found where they were keeping him.” He says, not at all sure why he suddenly fears Bruce’s judgement. Banner is the least judgmental person Tony knows, and that list includes Pepper. “And some of the people responsible.”

Either it’s the tone of his voice or the evasive way he looks around the room, but Banner has him on the money. “They still breathing?”

Tony doesn’t hesitate this time. “No.” He just waits for Bruce’s response.

“That’s a real slippery slope you’re standing on, Tony.” He says, his eyes dark with sympathy. He expects more. Maybe more condemnation, maybe more absolution. Bruce gives him neither. He doesn’t tend to pass judgment on these things, he just offers his advice and it’s up to you if you take it. Tony doesn’t take advice from many people, but Bruce is one of them.

They continue hooking up the databanks in silence. Between the two of them it doesn’t take long, and JARVIS is already running a program to strong-arm their way through the firewalls only a few minutes later.

“Am I the only one who thinks something weird is going on here?” Bruce asks, standing at Tony’s side as the screens fire off messages he plows through at a rate of knots.

“Yeah, who the hell still uses a 128 bit encryption? What is this, the dark ages?” Tony taps away, knowing full well that Bruce is talking about something else entirely.

Bruce doesn’t even bother addressing Tony’s bullshit deflection and just carries right on.

“His glutamate levels are insane, you know.” Bruce says. “It’s a miracle he hasn’t actually killed one of us yet.”

“That’s the kind of miracle I like.” Tony says. “The non-dying kind.” He doesn’t like what it says that Bruce has been able to measure high levels of the chemical associated with fear. If Barnes is in a constant state of fight or flight it really *is* a miracle that he’s not damaged either himself or one of them. He lets that sink in for a second. “He’s afraid of us.”

“I think he’s afraid of everything.” Bruce responds. “Can you blame him?”

“No.” Tony says, a wave of sickness rolling in his stomach as he thinks of that bank vault and the people inside it. “No I can’t.”

“I had JARVIS run more scans while you were gone. He sat through ‘em real quiet.” Bruce and JARVIS get along even better than Tony and JARVIS do, which is to say Tony’s half waiting for the day his AI leaves him for another scientist. Bruce shows him the scans on his tablet and Tony pauses in his work to look them over.

“I’m no neurologist but that doesn’t look good.” Barnes’ brain waves are a mess, and his scans don’t look a whole lot better. There are areas of significant trauma clearly visible, and while it shouldn’t surprise him knowing what HYDRA does, it is pretty disturbing seeing a visual representation of the damage.

“Even Clint’s didn’t look this bad, and that was with Loki behind the wheel.” Bruce points out.

“Yeah, but Natasha ‘recalibrated’ him.” Tony says. He’s started to love how she and Barton use words like ‘calibrate’ and ‘nicely’ when what they really mean is ‘beat the crap out of’ and ‘terrifying’.

“She hit him in the head.” Bruce snorts. “I don’t think that is going to help us here.”

“It’s a thought, though.” Tony says absently.

“Physical violence? I think Steve tried that.” Bruce frowns.

“No, I mean our merry Asgardian friends.” Loki had used the spear to control Clint and countless others. Whether you call that science or magic, the tech exists in their world.

Bruce looks sceptical, no doubt recalling the last time they got involved with alien technology. “I don’t think going to Loki is our best option. Clint might actually shot him for real this time.” He doesn’t sound bothered by the idea, merely that he’s pointing out the likelihood of bloodshed.

“I would highly endorse and encourage him in that action.” Tony says darkly. Loki’s another one of those people he can’t think about without having to resist the urge to do physical violence. Whatever his motives, whatever his reasons, Tony doesn’t give a single shred of a damn. He murdered Phil Coulson. He messed with the head of a man Tony greatly respects. He tried to take over the world. He brought devastation (and aliens) down on New York And he used Tony’s tower to do it. Plus, there was the whole near-death experience with the damn portal thing. So no. No Loki. “What about Thor?” Tony suggests. Might as well go all out on the Avengers reunion, and Thor has access to things that literally exist outside the reality of this world.

He can see Bruce consider it then nod. “I’ll contact Erik, he can maybe pass a message on via Jane.”

“We need to get him a cell phone.” Tony mutters under his breath.

“Don’t think they have much of a reception in Asgard.” Bruce laughs quietly. He taps away at his screen, then, “done. One S.O.S to the land of myths and legends on its way.”

Tony nods. That’s something at least. They need all the help they can get, not just with Barnes, but with HYDRA as well. Tony’s not afraid they might go after Thor to try and lure him over to their side, even if they certainly are insane enough to try. For a split second Tony entertains the thought of the HYDRA goons going face to face with Thor at his most righteous, and it brings a smile to

his face.

In the meantime, Bruce turns back to Barnes' scans. "It's healing." He admits, "at a guess I'd say we're maybe looking at thirty percent of the original damage. Whatever they did to him to achieve this, at least accelerated healing has some advantages."

"So what you're saying is that HYDRA would send out a brain damaged, amnesiac assassin to do their dirty work? How did that not blow up in their faces?" It amazes Tony that HYDRA were able to make the program work for them. It amazes him even more to think that they managed it for the best part of seventy years. Even knowing HYDRA technology trumped a great deal of their own, the type of equipment you'd need to scramble someone's memory like that should still have been years out of their grasps. They probably started with drugs - lots of drugs. Trial and error with a regenerating lab rat.

"Who says it didn't?" Bruce points out. "There's got to be a reason why they kept him under such strict control. You've seen him: he follows orders on instinct." This was very true. Creepily true. The most life and autonomy they have seen from him was at the piano, and even then he'd all but asked Steve's permission to continue playing.

"You have a theory." Tony can just tell. It's in the slightly distant look Bruce gets in his eyes when he's on to a wave of brilliance. It's a little awe-inspiring to watch.

"By all accounts, Barnes was a good guy, right?" Bruce starts.

"You ask Rogers and he'll say the guy hung the damn moon." Tony says dryly. And that was possibly an understatement. "But yeah, even my dad said he was a standup guy." There had always been something distant in Howard's eyes when he spoke specifically about Barnes. It wasn't the frustration and regret he so clearly felt over Steve, but it was something undefinable.

"So maybe that's why." Bruce suggests.

"They kept him in cryo?"

"And consistently wiped his memory." Bruce nods. "Look, let's hypothesize for a second. Let's say he loses his memory after the fall. They find him, they know that they've already experimented on him so he's a logical choice to continue working on. And he's a blank slate. He's open to manipulation and coercion."

"Makes sense." Tony agrees. Barnes had been the perfect victim, really.

"Yes, but. This is where we veer into the whole nature versus nurture thing and I'm not even sure that's relevant, but...they start training him, they gear him up for missions and he's obedient because they are the only things he has in his life. He doesn't know any better and between the drugs and the torture they've probably got him convinced the sky is purple."

Tony can see where he's going. "But some things aren't memory, they are instinct." He adds, nodding as he follows.

"And instincts can trigger behavioral patterns that affect cognitive function."

"You think he started to regain his memory." Tony surmises.

"I think they ran into some kind of glitch in the system." Bruce agrees. "The type of damage - and I'm talking physical here, not just mental - that I can see represented in these scans... you don't inflict that, even on someone with Barnes' regenerative abilities, not without having exhausted all

other options.”

“They were afraid of him.” Tony says, thinking of the setup of the bank, the number of soldiers Barnes had implied were on site. That wasn’t to keep things out, it was to keep them in. “Why be scared of something you have absolute control over? Unless they weren’t one hundred percent convinced they *did* have it.” He glances up at Bruce hopefully. “You think he can get his memories back.”

“I think it’s a possibility.” Bruce nods. “We just need to be real careful about how we go about helping him do so. With or without them, he’s traumatized, regressive and he’s living in a state of perpetual terror. Yet he doesn’t leave, he isn’t getting angry, he’s doing what we tell him to...”

“Because if he doesn’t have this then he’s got even less than the nothing he’s got now.” Tony concludes, feeling sick and guilty, like he’s just as responsible for taking advantage of Barnes’ state as HYDRA are.

“He wants to know who he is.” Bruce says sadly. “In his mind, Steve’s the only one who can give him those answers.”

Tony turned back to the screen and watched as JARVIS broke the final encryption protocol. “Then let’s see if we can’t get him some more.”

“You drunk enough for this?” Bruce asked, moving back to his own station where a holographic workup of Barnes’ mechanical arm hovered. Tony itched to go poke at it, but apparently he has learned how to prioritize in his old age.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been drunk enough for this. And I’ve been pretty drunk. I’ve been very drunk. I’ve been very pretty drunk...”

“Tony?” Bruce calls, eyebrows raised.

“Right.” Tony clears his throat nervously as the data unravels itself on screen.

He doesn’t even know where to start.

“Should we get Steve down here?” Bruce suggests.

Tony wants to say no. Not until they know exactly what they are dealing with, and if it is at all appropriate to be showing it to him.

But then he doesn’t think anything they’ve got is going to be. Still. “No. Not yet.” Bruce doesn’t disagree. They turn their attention to the screens.

“Where do we even start?” Tony groans in frustration. “Eeny meeny miny mo?”

“The beginning’s usually a good place.” Bruce suggests with just a hint of sarcasm.

Tony rolls his eyes and opens the document with the oldest date of origin. He didn’t necessarily expect it to be the very first selection of data on the Winter Soldier, and it wasn’t. It actually looked like a scan of a document.

“Looks like we’ve got the order form.” He says darkly, “One blatant disregard for human dignity dated 1946.”

Bruce wanders over to take a look.

There is no reference to the Winter Soldier. The project is merely named Project Classified, but under head researcher is the name Doctor Arnim Zola. There's another dozen names listed as either assistants or support technicians. Tony makes a mental note to double check that they are all dead and buried.

The details are vague, referring only to a weapon of 'an advanced offensive nature' and a brief outline of the required funds. The worst thing is that it is all typed on SHIELD letterheads.

No. That's a lie.

The worst thing is at the bottom of the page.

It is the words 'Director's Authorization'.

It's Howard Stark's signature below.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! Busy, busy weekend!

Much love and thanks should be given to Titheniel for reminding me that I can't make inappropriate jokes because I'm too much of a wimp to handle the feels. She makes this story 100% better!

I'm slowly catching up on responding to all your wonderful comments (and threats against Howard Stark...) but thank you again for being so kind, welcoming and generous with your thoughts!

Finally, if you want to come drown in more feels with me, I'm still figuring out this tumblr thing!

www.boopboopbi.tumblr.com

There are soft voices coming from the main room as Tony hovers at the top of the stairs, just out of sight. He can't bring himself to move any closer.

"What about failsafes?" Natasha asks, her voice low and quiet enough that Tony has to strain to hear her. "If the mission went sour, what were you supposed to do?"

He can't hear the response, but he can only assume Barnes is responding by Clint's slightly incredulous, "What, never?"

He edges a little closer and can just about hear Barnes say, "Not until this time."

"What if your safe house was compromised?" Natasha probes. "Where were you supposed to report in?"

"There's a secondary location in D.C I was supposed to head to if a mission lasted longer than forty eight hours." Barnes responds in the same soft, empty voice. "I never used it."

Tony can tell by what little of the conversation that he's heard that they are trying to build a picture of HYDRA's standard operating procedure from what is left in Barnes' memory. He supposes that's a fair route to take. Most of what Barnes retains is muscle memory - how to fight, how to run, how to talk - but there are things HYDRA must have put in his mind in order to make him the effective assets that he was. Somewhere inside his head is a way to give them the edge in this fight, they just need to find a way to bring it out without causing more harm than good. If anyone has the skill and subtlety to do that, it is Natasha.

"Tony." Tony doesn't look around when Bruce appears behind him and her voice becomes just a background murmur as his thoughts become louder and more demanding. He doesn't move. He doesn't do much, actually. He just sort of hovers there, not sure what to do or say, and or if he even has the courage to rejoin the small group who have come to mean so much to him. "Tony, come on..." Bruce has seen what Tony has seen, seen the evidence of another Stark legacy printed on paper and now preserved digitally for history to see. "...it might not even be what it looks like."

He loves Bruce for trying to help, he does, but there's a reason he hightailed it out of the lab and there's a reason he's standing on the stairs, out of place in his own damn home.

"Really?" He says, no humor or wit in his voice now, just rough, broken edges. "Because it looks pretty clear to me."

"That doesn't mean anything." Bruce tries to console him. "How often do you read the bits of paper Pepper shoves under your nose to sign?"

Tony's appalled, and horrified, and at the same time selfishly, hopelessly wishing for it to be true. The idea that his own carelessness could lead to something like this is abhorrent, but he hopes to god that's what happened with his father.

Tony's got issues with his dad. So, so, so many issues, and there's no claiming he's Howard's number one fan. He's not even top hundred. But one of the things Tony resents about him the most is how much everyone who isn't Tony thought he was the greatest guy ever. Sure, Howard was an asshole sometimes, they say, very driven, very dedicated, but he was a good guy, a good friend...

He knows for a fact that Howard and Steve were buddies. He's also ninety percent sure that most of the issues Steve has with him stem from the fact that he's disappointed in Tony being Howard's legacy, and well, yes, Steve can join the club, really because it's not like Tony doesn't feel that way about himself 24/7.

It also makes him ninety-nine percent certain that Howard and Barnes were friends, too.

Friends - good friends - they don't condemn you to a life of torture and servitude.

"What about SHIELD?" Natasha prompts. "What do you know about them?" Given that HYDRA had grown in SHIELD from the start it's not an unreasonable question to ask.

"Just what you put online." Barnes admits. "Founded by Margaret 'Peggy' Carter and Howard Stark in 1946. The acronym originally stood for Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-Enforcement but was renamed the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division in 2009. Howard Stark wanted to call it the Red Room but was told it made them sound too much like a brothel." He recites flatly verbatim, like he's reading off a list from his head. It's all information Natasha leaked and Tony's heard that comment about his dad more than once in the last few weeks. To be fair, the Red Room does have a particularly sleazy - and kinda sinister- ring to it.

"Now that sounds like dear old dad." Tony chooses his entrance carefully, knowing full well that if he gets them laughing they'll be more likely to overlook the stress in his posture.

He's rather proud when it works.

He's less proud when he spots Barnes in the armchair next to Steve's. He's got his knees tucked up to his chin and his arms wrapped around his shins as he sits. It's a strange, almost childish position for such a well built man to adopt, but then it matches his expression perfectly.

There's a longing in his eyes as he softly answers their questions. A desire to help, to be useful. And yet, at the same time, Tony sees the growing darkness lurking just behind it all as his efforts seem inadequate. Bruce is right. Barnes is toeing the line because he has no other option, but sooner or later that anger Tony knows he has to be feeling is going to break out. The longer he's away from HYDRA, the safer he starts to feel in his environment, the more they are going to start seeing of that darkness.

If Tony ever had doubts about sticking this out, they vanished the second he saw his father's signature on the form that made all this happen.

"Hey Stark." Barton nods in greeting. "How's the science going?"

"It's going." Tony shrugs. "Gonna take some time." That's a lie. It's going to *need* some time. "So what's with the 'Call of Duty stuff'?" He asks, knowing full well why it's so important that they try understand what exactly it is that Barnes knows about HYDRA's operation. Over the last few days he's gotten used to thinking of Barnes as someone incredibly vulnerable and in need of their protection, but while all of that is true he's still supposed to be HYDRA's most dangerous weapon. They can't not take advantage of that, no matter how distasteful it may be.

Natasha pretty much says as much, though from the way her eyes keep darting over to Steve it's obvious that he at least doesn't approve. He's visibly torn between telling Natasha to back off, and gently prompting responses from Barnes himself.

It's Clint who responds, as always the most openly pragmatic about these things. His gaze is sympathetic, but he doesn't beat around the bush. "Bucky's probably the only eyes into HYDRAs ops that we're ever gonna get. Can't waste an opportunity like that." Barnes' eyes flicker over to him briefly, before they settle on Tony.

He doesn't make all that much eye-contact with any of them but Steve, and when Tony meets his gaze it feels like someone's reached inside him and wrapped a cold hand around his heart. Human eyes aren't supposed to look like that. Not when Tony's seen evidence that they once danced with happiness and mischief.

"They jogging any memories?" Tony asks, his voice rough. If there was ever a question as to if Tony would go through every single file they have recovered from HYDRA, it vanishes in the second Barnes just shrugs.

"Only what was already there." He says dejectedly. "There's nothing new."

Tony needs to see those files. All of them.

He needs to know if his dad really had been involved, and that means watching every video, listening to every audio track, reading every report. Tony has a whole lot of sins he needs to atone for with Barnes and while they might not be his, they are he's family's. He's reaped the benefits of being a Stark for forty two years. Now's the time to pay the piper.

"It's better than nothing." Steve says soothingly. "So you've got another location? Maybe it's worth taking a look at?"

Barnes is already shaking his head. "There's nothing there. I checked." Tony can see Steve tense at the idea of Barnes going back to them, no matter the purpose.

"Was it one of the ones we compromised when we took down SHIELD?" Steve asks.

"I don't think so." Barnes says. "I never used it." He repeats that, and it sounds as if he's reminding himself of how effective he used to be. Tony's not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing, or if it's something HYDRA stuffed into his head as some sick, manipulative form of praise.

"Is there anything else you can remember?" Natasha prompts gently. She's leaning forward on the couch she's sharing with Clint. They're both dressed in civilian clothing and he has his arm thrown over the back of the couch. Their legs are tangled together in a way that looks relaxed and comfortably intimate, but Tony doesn't doubt for a second that they aren't both on high alert. Clint,

for the most part, is letting Natasha do the talking, which leaves him free to keep those razor sharp eyes on the room.

Barnes swallows. Tony pours himself and Bruce two very generous helpings of whiskey from the wet bar. “No. I-“ his gaze flickers to the floor, “Just the assignment.”

“That’s all they gave you?” Natasha asks to clarify. Barnes nods. “And your mission was to kill Steve.”

“And you.” Barnes says, unable to lift his gaze from the floor, let alone meet her eye.

“But you didn’t.” Steve says, leaning forwards, his eyes soft and infinitely kind. “You saved my life. You pulled me out of the water. You did that, not them. You beat them.”

Barnes still doesn’t look up. He remains hunched in the chair, looking lost and confused, like a part of him is still not one hundred percent sure *why* he did that.

Minutes lapse in silence as they all struggle to find the right words.

“*Sir?*” Tony’s just about ready to kiss JARVIS’ cpu in thanks as the interruption breaks up the heavy air that has settled on the room.

“Yes, JARVIS, what can I do for you? Is there an army of invading space slugs that requires our immediate attention?” He probably sounds a little more hopeful than he intends, but blowing things up might actually be therapeutic right now. It gets a small, broken laugh either way.

“*Not that I am aware of sir, however Sam Wilson is at the door.*”

“Finally!” Steve says, standing up and moving towards the door before Tony can even respond.

“Let him in.” Tony says, and a second later the front door opens to reveal the rather harried looking man waiting on admittance. Wilson’s got the physique of a soldier and the kind eyes of a counselor. The tired expression on his face falls away when Steve reaches him and the two clasp hands like old friends.

“You’re late.” Steve says, obviously relieved to see him.

“You worried?” Sam asks cheekily, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he grins.

“Why would I worry?” Steve asks, deflecting through his teeth. You’d have thought by now that Steve would have learned to hide his emotions a little more carefully, especially after prolonged exposure to Natasha. He’s still as bad a liar as he was when Tony first met him. It’s one of his most endearing qualities, even if Tony will ruthlessly mock him for it. If more people were as uncomfortable with lying as Steve is then the world would be a whole less messy.

“He was.” Natasha corrects him, nodding by way of greeting. Neither she nor Clint have moved from the couch, which suggests she trusts Sam as much as she trusts the rest of them. That’s a little impressive. She’s a hard woman to win over, and an even harder person to gain the trust of.

“Wilson.”

“Nat.” Sam nods his head right back then turns to Barnes with a careful, neutral smile. “Bucky.”

Barnes doesn’t meet his eyes, but Sam gives no indication that this bothers him. He’s still sat awkwardly on the chair, and if anything he’s shrunk in on himself further.

“Introductions, Steven.” Tony says loudly. Honestly, you’d think the boy had been raised in a barn.

“Tony, meet Sam Wilson.” Steve says, rolling his eyes exasperatedly. “Sam, this is Tony Stark and Doctor Bruce Banner.” They all either smile or wave their hands as they are introduced. Tony raises his glass in salute. “You’ve talked to Clint already.”

“Hey man.” Barton says easily. After Steve, he’s always been the friendliest of them when it comes to dealing with new additions. It’s an odd quirk for someone who has such a deep mistrust of people. “You look like hell.”

“About as good as I feel then.” Sam laughs tiredly. “It’s good to meet y’all. Weird. But good.”

“Weird is sort of our thing.” Tony admits. He’s not quite ready to trust this guy, not yet, but he’ll give him far more leeway than he would anyone else purely because of his ease with Natasha and Steve. “Drink?”

“No, thank you.” Sam says, shaking his head.

“So how did it go?” Steve asks, leading him over to the seating area. Sam drops onto the end of the couch, looking bone weary and worried.

“Not good, man. Not even a little good.” He admits. “They’re regrouping pretty damn fast.” Tony’ll take a wild stab in the dark that ‘they’ are HYDRA.

“Sam’s been covering our tracks down in Tallahassee.” Steve explains. “After Bucky found us—”

“Wait,” Tony interrupts, surprised, “you found them?” He asks Barnes, who uncurls his legs and nods hesitantly.

“He saved our asses.” Sam corrects. “Which, you know, thanks for that by the way. I know we were a bit busy getting shot at at the time but my ass appreciates not being riddled with bullets.”

Barnes just looks at him, uncomfortable with the thanks.

Steve drops down to perch on the arm of his chair, so his elbow brushes the top of Barnes’ metal arm. Tony doubts Barnes can feel the contact in a physically soothing way, but it seems to calm him down anyway. It also does wonders for Steve, who can barely stand to let Barnes out of his sight. Tony can understand that. He’s been exactly the same way with Pepper after nearly losing her. It makes him question the exact nature of Steve’s feelings for Barnes, because while Tony’s been driven to violence and rage on behalf of Happy and Rhodey in the past, Pepper is really the only one who can make him feel like someone has ripped his heart out of his chest. She’s the best part of him and the thing he would do, say or give anything to protect. He loves her, and he can’t help but wonder if it’s the same kind of love that leaves Steve looking so hollowed out by what’s happening.

“We followed a tip that Bucky had been sighted in Tallahassee,” Steve says sounding weary again. “Probably would have been more subtle about it if the same tip didn’t indicate a HYDRA weapons plant in the city. I might have panicked.” He admits with a shamed glance at the rest of them. Tony doubts his idea of panic really matches up with everyone else’s and that’s confirmed by Sam.

“You don’t panic like regular people panic, man.” He says, his brow furrowing in a way that suggests he doesn’t like it when Steve talks down on himself. “You were concerned.”

“A couple of my sources claimed that HYDRA were readying to retake possession of an important asset.” Natasha says. “We had good reason to think they were referring to Bucky.”

“Let me guess,” Tony says, thinking of the state they had been in when they arrived on his doorstep, “it was a trap?”

Steve nods. “It’s good to know I can count on HYDRA to consistently try to kill me.” He says with a wry nod of his jaw.

“You’re a popular guy, what can I say?” Sam snorts.

“I should have known better.” Steve shakes his head.

“HYDRA have always been good at finding their enemy’s vulnerabilities.” Natasha tells him. “I should never have trusted the intel. If it’s anyone’s fault it’s mine.”

“Or, you know, HYDRA’s.” Bruce puts in. “Let’s place the blame where it belongs here.”

Tony nods in agreement. Barnes is Steve’s vulnerability - maybe even his only one, and HYDRA want him dead as much as they want Barnes back in their custody. It makes a certain kind of sick sense that they would use Barnes as a hook to lure Steve into a trap. It worries him more that Steve probably knew that going in, but didn’t let that stop him. It’s good that they’re all together now. Steve needs someone to watch his back in this.

“So where do you come in?” He asks Barnes directly. He wants to draw him more actively into the conversation and this seems like the perfect opportunity.

Barnes hesitates then swallows. “I was following you.” He answers Steve, not Tony, but it’s better than nothing. “I saw the exhibit.” Tony hopes to god he’s not talking about the Captain America set up in the Smithsonian. That’s not really the way anyone needs to be learning about one’s identity. Especially not when it’s all angled towards propaganda. “I wanted to talk to you.” His words are slow and hesitant, his expression utterly miserable, “but I couldn’t. So I followed.” He hears all the things Barnes doesn’t say. His voice is distant and flat, and yet his eyes speak volumes, as if he’s both ashamed and frustrated with himself. And confused, as if all the thoughts and feelings he’s encountering are alien and uncomfortable to him, and that being forced to acknowledge them is not as pleasant as he might have hoped.

The fact that he was able to follow them makes him officially the stealthiest son of a bitch Tony’s ever heard of because if Steve is one thing it’s observant. A little *too* observant. Tony had taken him to a baseball game with Bruce not too long after they all nearly died saving New York. Within about thirty seconds Steve had spotted all the undercover agents sent to watch over Bruce like a hawk.

Still, if Barnes had been in his ‘I don’t sleep, I don’t eat’ routine still then he probably had an easier time sticking to the shadows and keeping watch.

“He saved our asses.” Steve says, smiling down at Barnes with a glow of warmth in his eyes. “Although next time, try not to get shot while doing it, yes?” He’s asking for more than an avoidance of bullets though - he’s asking Barnes to show some care for his own safety. At this point in the game, Tony thinks he’d have more luck asking for the moon.

“You got shot?” Sam exclaims, his eyes widening. “Jesus Rogers, I leave you alone for five minutes-“

“Oh, I like him.” Clint leans over to whisper loudly in Natasha’s ear.

“It was before we separated.” Steve says, glancing meaningfully down at Bucky.

Sam stops mid-rant as he realizes that he missed it happening as well. “Right.” He says awkwardly.

“Back on subject?” Natasha suggests with an artless shrug. “HYDRA?”

“Yes,” Sam says, clearing his throat, “I laid the false trail just like you told me,” he says to Natasha, who smiles proudly, “regrouped, did a little recon. They’re gunning bad for us.”

“How so?” Tony asks. He needs to know exactly what they are up against if he’s going to be able to get them all out in one piece.

“Well by the looks of things they were upping production in a pretty big way.” Sam says, his expression troubled. “And they were shipping out some serious hardware. I don’t know what for. If that information was available then they weren’t keeping it on site.”

“I thought you exposed HYDRA.” Bruce said, his brow furrowing, “when you put everything out on the internet. How can they be recovering already?”

“I wish.” Steve sighs. “But I think it’s become pretty obvious that they didn’t keep all their eggs in the one basket. There was practically nothing about the Winter Soldier on their servers.”

“So what you’re saying is that we really have no idea how large HYDRA is, or who is in it?” Bruce doesn’t look as vindicated as he should probably be feeling, what with his endless belief in the corruption of governing bodies. He just looks slightly ill.

“Nick’s doing what he can to paint us a bigger picture.” Natasha says, “He’s in Europe but he’s got people on the ground stateside. But it’s a big op.”

“Ah. Yes.” Tony says, remembering the calls Fury had made on the day Steve and Barnes showed up. “I was supposed to call him back. My bad.”

“He called you?” Clint frowned. “What did he say?”

“I didn’t answer.” Tony shrugs.

“Why not?” Clint demands.

“Because people were bleeding on my carpet!” Tony yells, losing the fraying edges of his temper without really knowing why. Even though things are tense, no one has really raised their voice yet, and Tony’s sudden explosion stuns them. Every pair of eyes in the room are suddenly fixed on him, including Barnes. Tony fidgets, and that’s when Steve sees through him.

“You’ve hooked up the databanks, haven’t you?” He demands, finally seeing through Tony’s act now his attention is not purely focused on Barnes. “What did you find out?” Tony says nothing. “Tony!”

“I only just got it online.” Tony answers quietly, buying some time. He still doesn’t know how to tell Steve about Howard. He doesn’t know if he dares.

“So lets take a look.” Steve says, standing. “The more we know about their operation the more likely it is that we’ll be able to predict their next move.”

“We know their next move.” Tony says impatiently. “Their next move is to bring him back in and start this up all over again.” He glances down at Barnes, who is still sat there, quiet and unmoving, and Tony has the horrible, irrational urge to shake him. He should be getting angry, he should be demanding answers. Instead he just looks dead behind the eyes, the odd spark of life only fleeting

things that are quickly smothered out of existence.

“That’s not happening.” Steve says, his teeth grit together and his jaw tight. “So, let’s go see what it is we are up against.”

“Not a good idea, Cap.” Bruce shakes his head gently. “We’ve got seventy years worth of data to work through. It’s gonna take us some time before we find anything useful. You don’t need to be wasting your time looking at reports. Let Tony and me handle it.” Bruce is buying Tony time as much as he is Steve.

It almost works. Tony sees Steve hesitate, prepare to back down.

But then:

“I want to see.” Barnes speaks up quietly.

That’s not what Steve wants to hear. It’s not what any of them want to hear.

But really, they should have expected it. Of course Barnes wants to know what they did to him.

Unlike Steve, they can’t tell him to back down. They have no right to step between him and the truth of this.

“You sure you’re ready for it?” Sam asks kindly. “There’s no shame in waiting.”

“We don’t have time” Barnes asks. “This could help. I might remember things.” He’s still only looking at Steve. Tony’s not the only one who hears the word ‘you’ when he says ‘things’.

As much as he wants to argue, both to buy himself as much time as to give Barnes all the space he needs to come at this from a more healthy place, he knows they can’t. They need to move before HYDRA does if they are going to keep their advantage. And they need to. They can’t be fighting this from the back bench.

Even Steve knows as much, though his expression makes it far too clear how much he doesn’t like this. “Bucky-“ He sounds pained. He doesn’t want to expose Barnes to anything that might cause him further hurt.

Tony doesn’t think it is actually possible for that to happen. You can’t hurt something that’s dead inside.

“Please. Let me help?” Barnes asks, begging permission to know what atrocities were inflicted on him so he could help them fight back. Tony can’t help but remember the way Barnes had hesitated before entering the surgery in his house back in the Hamptons. He’d been both saddened and impressed by Barnes’ courage then. It’s a hundred times worse now.

Tony refills his glass right to the top as Steve nods hesitantly. He’s never going to be drunk enough for this, but he’s learned that liberal applications of whiskey can sometimes dull the sensation of pain, even just a little.

It’ll have to be enough.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I'm not allowed to give Titheniel credit any more so I'm just going to point at her and make nodding faces.

Chocolate/ice cream/comfort food/drink of choice might be needed for this one, but I promise the action is going to kick off again soon.

Steve and Barnes are the only ones to accompany Tony down to the lab. Even Bruce hangs behind, both keen to give Barnes as much privacy as they can, and also to remove himself from what will no doubt be a highly volatile situation. Tony half wishes he could do the same, cowardly though it is. But for all that Steve's a whole lot better at handling technology than Tony will ever give him credit for, there is modern technology, and then there is Tony's technology. They need him to work the magic.

And there's no question of Steve being there. If Barnes asks, maybe he'll wait outside, but Tony knows he won't and on this occasion, Steve's not going to offer. If what they see does trigger some kind of breakdown in Barnes, Steve's the one with the best hope of calming him down. Or, Tony thinks with a wave of sickness in his stomach, stop Barnes from hurting anyone, or himself.

Tony just hopes they aren't going to have to calm Steve down, because he doesn't relish the idea of having to go toe to toe with a pissed off Captain America.

"So where do you fellas want to start?" Tony asks, relieved to see that Bruce has closed the file with Howard Stark's name stamped all over it from the main screens.

Steve doesn't look like he even knows where to begin. If anything Barnes appears far more calm. He's got his arms crossed in front of him, cradling his flesh and bone elbow in the palm of his metal hand in a way that's both at ease and comforting. Tony literally doesn't want to dwell on the fact that it's been seventy years since someone gave the guy a hug. If he weren't convinced Barnes would dropkick him through a wall for trying, he'd be all over it.

"Make it recent." Barnes says, his voice still shockingly empty. "More useful."

Tony nods. As much as they will eventually need to know the full picture, what they need right now is to get an idea of what the Winter Soldier has been up to recently - who he's been in contact with, and what he was used to do.

Tony has JARVIS pull up all the files from the last six months and eliminate all non-media data. There are only four results left, which suggests that with the exception of his encounter with Steve, Barnes has been on ice for most of the year.

He hesitates before playing. "Last chance." He says to them. "No take backs." Steve says nothing, his expression grim and uncommonly cold. Barnes is a blank a mask as ever. "Alright then." Tony whispers. "Play file."

It opens in the projector, to scale and frighteningly detailed. It had been bad enough seeing the

wreckage of the Chinese Theater recreated with the new tech. This is a horrifying replica of the bank vault in D.C.

There's an elderly man in a suit and tie, a lab coat hanging from his shoulders with the type of casual ease that suggests he's been wearing one for a long, long time.

He sits in front of the camera and addresses it directly.

"Assignment 298, date of commencement 12/09/2013. Present are Doctors Mortimer, Hughes, Shakill and Huu. Also present research team beta and STRIKE Force Two. Assignment overseen by myself Doctor Aleksander Lukin, and Alexander Pierce." There's a lot of activity in the room, most specifically around the cryo tank. Tony can see Pierce standing by the vault door, flanked by the STRIKE team who are all aiming weapons at the tank like they expect something to jump out and bite them.

"Do you remember him?" Steve asks Barnes, who is staring blankly at the recording. He shakes his head slowly and Steve returns to glaring a hole through the projection.

"Time of reanimation eleven twenty three." Lukin signals to one of his assistants who keys in the authorization into the tank's computer. "The asset has been in cryostasis for seven hundred and sixteen days. Poor motor reflexes and confusion are to be expected. Prep for recalibration." Lukin orders another member of his team, who moves over to the chair and begins programming it with whatever perimeters Lukin sets.

The scientists move about their business with clockwork fluidity. Tony can recognize several of them and is overwhelmed by the knowledge that they are all dead now. Natasha killed them. She knows what she's doing and they deserved far less than the swift, merciful death she provided.

He doesn't recognize Lukin though, and it troubles him to know that one of the key figures in all of this is still out there somewhere.

It doesn't take them long to bring the Barnes out of cryo, which leads Tony to suspect that they've done something to both the quantum cooling fields to aid in speeding up the process, and to Barnes himself to limit some of the shock such a procedure would normally throw the body into.

Whatever they have done, it's clearly not much, and not nearly enough. Four of the assistants eventually reach into the tank and lift out a jerking, trembling body. Barnes is dripping wet and naked, and he clearly has no idea what's happening to him.

He doesn't protest as he's carried over to the chair, but Tony doesn't if he could have even if he wanted to. His body is in shock and he struggles weakly as he's set down.

As soon as he's in the chair the restraints fasten and he lets out a small, choked sound of uncontrollable fear. Tony can barely tear his eyes away to look at Barnes, but he manages it and then quickly wishes he hadn't. There's nothing at all on Barnes face as he watches himself be manhandled and restrained like he's little more than a lab rat. There's no anger in his expression, no resentment or fear - but there's all that and more in his eyes. There's confusion, but worst of all there is acceptance - like this is okay, that he's resigned to it.

It's not okay, and if Barnes doesn't explode and break something, Tony might just do it for him.

Lukin moves to stand next to the chair as his team give Barnes almost a dozen different injections into the flesh of his human arm. There are two technicians working with the processor on his metal arm, no doubt checking the calibration after so long on ice. If anything Tony's once again itching

to have a dig around with the data Bruce collected, because to withstand the kind of stress both in combat and out takes some pretty impressive engineering prowess.

That thought dies quickly as Lukin takes a spot close to Barnes's head and gently lays a hand on his cheek. "At ease, soldier." He says, drawing Barnes's confused, panicked gaze to his own. "You have just been brought out of cryo-freeze. Your confusion and anxiety is understandable, but unnecessary. You are quite safe here." Tony doesn't dare look at Steve. He knows that if he does, one or both of them are going to lose it.

His skin crawls as Lukin continues to speak in a soft, soothing voice, switching to Russian as the technicians continue to carry out their tasks, taking liberties with Barnes body in ways that suggest they have done so multiple times before.

His core temperature is raised by the time Lukin stops calming him down. On the surface it seems like a kindness, but Tony can tell by the cadence of his voice that Lukin has said these words multiple times over the years. He's the final hammer on the nail of Barnes' brainwashing, the king of Stockholm Syndrome and the person right at the top of Tony's kill list.

Once they're done pumping him full of whatever chemicals they feel like, Barnes is released from the chair and sits up stiffly. He's calm now, his body compliant and malleable as they dress him in heavy BDUs. They don't give him any weapons yet, but there's a whole arsenal laid out close by.

Lukin hands him a folder and his eyes flick over the details inside. "Your assignment."

Barnes sits and reads in silence, uninterrupted by the technicians for several minutes until he sets the file calmly down on the bench. That's when Pierce comes over. "This one is a little different." He says, as though Barnes has any recollection of what is normal and what is not. "You're the fallback. I have a team on the ground to do the job, but if they mess up it's your job to ensure the target does not survive. Failure is not an option."

"He's never failed in the entire history of this program." Lukin looks mildly offended at the idea that his perfect soldier could be anything less so.

Pierce simply looks at him. "See that it stays that way. Report to me personally when the job is done."

"But--"

"I want this contained." Pierce says. "Handled incorrectly this could go very badly. We're already taking a risk in potentially exposing him to Rogers."

Barnes has no reaction to the mention of Steve's name, neither on camera, or in person. He's still standing next to Tony, blank as marble.

On camera, Lukin looks like he wants to object to the idea that Steve is a threat to them at all. Wisely, he remains quiet.

Pierce stands and lets Barnes walk slowly over to the table, testing out his shaky limbs. The shots they gave him have clearly helped stabilize his muscle function and by the time he's slipped the last of a half dozen blades into one compartment or another, his hands have stopped shaking completely.

There's even less behind his eyes than there is now as he allows the technicians to finish his preparation.

He's finally ready, and Lukin runs his final checks. He asks questions in Russian, and Barnes responds in kind. What Tony does understand is Nick Fury's name.

Barnes walks off camera and the recording goes blank for several seconds before resuming play once more.

There's no lead in or introduction, and Lukin looks pissed as he guides Barnes back down on to the chair. "Mission report?" He prompts, easing Barnes out of the thick and heavy leather body armor and passing it off to an assistant.

"Shouldn't we wait for Secretary Pierce, sir?" One of the technicians asks hesitantly. Lukin silences him with a grim scowl.

"Pierce will get his report when I'm good and ready to clear the asset for service." He snaps before gentling his expression and turning back to Barnes. "Well?"

"Target terminated." Barnes says in an emotionless voice.

"You tracked him down? No one saw you?" Lukin sounds almost concerned.

"The target sought shelter with an ally."

"Captain Rogers?"

"The soldier." Barnes says, oblivious to Lukin's worry.

"Did Captain Rogers see your face?" He asks quickly.

"Negative."

Lukin sighs in relief and touches the back of his head briefly before stepping back and allowing his team to run full checks on Barnes' health. "That's good. You must keep the goggles and the mask on at all times when in public. It is imperative that your identity remains concealed, understand?"

"I understand."

"Good. Pierce is a shortsighted fool, exposing us this way." He drifts off with his own thoughts, ignoring the worried looks being shot between his scientists. Tony can't imagine there were many people who spoke up about Pierce so vocally.

"Sir?" A cautious looking woman approaches him. "*He's* on the line. He wants you to come in."

Lukin frowns. "Finish running the tests then send him out to Pierce. Hopefully I'll be back before this clusterfuck escalates." Tony glances over at Steve, who looks equally confused. It's obvious from the conversation that they aren't talking about Pierce. That's another person to add to their list. Just when they think HYDRA is big enough, it grows another few heads. If nothing else they are the most aptly named terrorist group Tony's come across. It's certainly better than the Mandarin.

Lukin leaves and it seems like the rest of the team are uncertain without his presence, but they carry on, finally stepping back and giving Barnes more room than he would ever need to climb back to his feet.

One of the scientists clearly has bigger balls than the rest, because he is the only one to address Barnes, though he doesn't go so far as to look him in the eye. "You have your orders."

Barnes doesn't respond to them, and moves off camera with an efficiency and precision of motion that is quite frankly a little terrifying. It's the most threatening Tony's ever seen him look, and that includes the time he threw Steve at a chopper.

The image flickers and closes as Barnes leaves the screen. There's a long moment of blankness as JARVIS loads the next recording.

Almost instantly Tony knows something is wrong. Whereas the first two sessions showed a room full of calm, competent - evil, unquestionably - professional people, what they are seeing now is finely controlled panic and confusion.

Lukin is not present. Instead a twitchy looking man in a bow tie takes position in front of the screen. He looks nervous as all hell. Tony recognizes him as the one he locked in the tank before Natasha went to work. "Assignment 298, subset zero point five. Asset has failed to eliminate assigned targets and has been brought in for recalibration. Present are Doctor's Hughes, Shakill and Huu. Also present research team alpha and STRIKE Force One. Recalibration overseen by Doctor Nigel Mortimer."

Behind him is a flurry of commotion as Barnes returns to the screen, led in by a whole troop of heavily armed soldiers. If they were nervous the first time then they're all damn near wetting themselves now. Tony can see why.

While he'd hardly call Barnes actions confrontational, or even mildly aggressive, there's something in his expression that suggests one hell of a struggle is going on behind his eyes. He lets them remove his body armor and shirt, lets them sit him down on the chair to run diagnosis, but where as before he'd been malleable and soft, his limbs are stiff and unyielding now.

It's clear Mortimer has no idea how to handle the situation. The Winter Soldier has never failed to eliminate a target, and now he has they're all obviously picturing a complete breakdown of their programming. All eyes in the room are on Barnes, waiting for something to happen.

But whatever the war that is unfolding in Barnes' wounded mind, he puts up no physical protest as he's scanned and injected once more. On the monitor behind him, Tony can see six points of injury indicated. Mortimer moves from his seat and takes a worried look at the results before calling over two of his team. "Repair what damage you can to the mechanics." He orders. "Triage the rest." He steps off camera and leaves them to it.

Another doctor works on Barnes' opposite side. "Hairline fracture to the skull; cracked sternum; one broken rib and ruptured cartilage in the left knee." Tony feels more than sees Steve jerk beside him, turning haunted, horrified eyes on Barnes, who is watching the recording with unblinking eyes.

"I didn't think I hurt you that bad." Steve whispers, anguished. It's becoming obvious to Tony that whatever they have done to Barnes, they haven't quite replicated the Super Soldier Serum they used on Steve. While anyone going up against Steve in that kind of fight would probably have been reduced to a whispering mess, Barnes is still upright under his own power, which reflects the regenerative abilities Tony knows he has. It seems like Barnes could be classed more as an advanced human than super human like Steve, but it's hard to tell the difference when coupled with that stoicism and training.

Barnes doesn't respond to Steve's upset words, but he does jerk in surprise as he watches himself suddenly hurl the two technicians working on his arm half way across the room.

There is commotion off camera as well, even as everyone - and Tony can see Rumlow, that piece

of shit - brings their weapons up in response to the outburst. Barnes doesn't acknowledge them at all.

"Sir," Tony hears Mortimer say, "He's unstable, erratic..." Tony can perfectly recall the look in Mortimer's eyes as he was thrown in the tank. He replays to over and over as a way to calm himself down.

When Piece walks back on screen, any ground he makes vanish.

Pierce calls the soldiers off alert and approaches Barnes without a single shred of hesitancy. He, unlike the scientists, maintains his complete dominance of the room. "Mission report." He demands, slipping his glasses into his jacket pocket.

Barnes remains quiet and in an almost trance like state, his eyes seeing something that isn't in the room with him.

Pierce doesn't like being ignored. "Mission report. Now."

Barnes still doesn't answer.

Tony's still standing next to Steve, close enough that he can feel the tension radiating from him in waves. When Pierce steps closer to Barnes and backhands him across the face, Steve's rage is almost electric.

It seems such a petty, pointless act of violence against a man who is showing now acknowledgment of the wounds he got fighting Steve but Tony guesses it is less about pain and more about control. It certainly knocks Barnes out of his daze, though when he turns confused eyes on Pierce, he doesn't answer the way they are expecting him to.

Instead he asks, "The man on the bridge? Who was he?"

"You met him earlier this week on another assignment." Pierce says carefully, not wishing to prompt too much.

Barnes seems to process this for a moment, then says "I knew him." He looks certain, so sure in his knowledge, and yet confused by it at the same time.

Pierce takes a seat so he is sitting eye level with Barnes, and Tony puts him back on the top of his pile of manipulative assholes. "Your work has been a gift to mankind." He says. "You shaped the century. And I need you to do it one more time." Barnes lifts his head, his expression somewhere between miserable and hopeless. "Society is at a tipping point between order and chaos. Tomorrow morning we're gonna give it a push. But, you don't do your part, I can't do mine. And HYDRA can't give the world the freedom it deserves."

That, Tony thinks, might just be the most important bit of information they've garnered from the last hour or so of torture. However they were able to control him, whatever they did to so brutally strip the person Barnes was from his own mind, they are still appealing him with the idea that he is doing good. He thinks back to what Bruce said: that there must have been a reason for them to handle him the way they did, and that perhaps that lay in the fact that deep down, Barnes was a good man who only wanted to do what was right. It seems like Bruce was right, and that gives Tony all the hope in the world that with that foundation, somehow they can fix this.

But as the hope is blossoming inside him, Barnes looks back up to Pierce, his expression haunted and shockingly childlike, and says: "But I knew him."

Tony swears he can hear the exact sound Steve's heart makes as it breaks. He wonders if it is anything like his own.

Pierce stops trying to appeal to him and addresses the scientists. "Prep him."

"He's been out of cryo-freeze too long." Mortimer says, his eyes flickering worriedly between Barnes and Pierce.

It's obvious that does not concern Pierce. He merely looks down coolly and says, "Then wipe him, and start over."

There's a brief look of total hopelessness on Barnes' face before he's pushed back against the chair and his expression becomes resigned. He remembers this. Somehow, despite all the damage done to his mind, he remembers this process. It's clear from the way he accepts the shock guard between his teeth without looking up or waiting for it. It's clear from the way he tenses when the restraints close around his arms.

And from the way he starts to hyperventilate before the machine even closes around his head.

He's only just started to scream when Steve surges forward and hurtles the projection monitor all the way across the room.

Tony's a little too shocked to react. A distant part of his mind is horrified, sickened, but he feels surprisingly numb to it, like he's still watching a replay of history on a computer and has all the distance that gives him.

It's Barnes' voice that pulls him out of it.

"I knew you." He says, as soft and broken as he'd been on that chair. "Why don't I know you now?"

Tony had been sure this couldn't hurt worse than it already did but he takes that back as he watches that scared, helpless child he'd seen on camera crawl back into Barnes' expression.

Steve makes a pained sound in the back of his throat then moves in close, so he's got his forehead against Barnes' and his hands gently on his cheeks. "You do know me." He whispers. Barnes shakes his head against Steve's hopelessly. "No, you do." Steve promises. "You might not remember how we met, or what my middle name is, or that winter in 38 when you promised that if I got pneumonia one more time you'd kill me yourself...but you do know me, Bucky."

Tony hadn't felt like a voyeur when Barnes had been showering, or when they two of them had been sleeping, curled up side by side. Now he does.

Barnes' hands, both flesh and metal have curled around the back of Steve's arms, as if to brace himself against the crumbling reality around him.

Tony slips away quietly, aware that there are tears damp on his face. He rubs them away angrily. Barnes isn't crying, why should he be?

He makes it to the top of the stairs then crashes into Natasha, who steadies him with a hand on his elbow. One look at her face tells him everything he needs to know. Apparently she is an open book when you are truly allowed under her skin. "What happened?" he asks.

"I was coming to get you." She says softly.

Tony's not in the mode to be coddled. "What happened?"

Her expression hardens. "HYDRA know he's here."

Chapter 12

“How do they know he’s here?” Tony demands, less than a heartbeat away from punching the wall in frustration. Natasha leads him up to the main level and over to the coffee table where Clint, Sam and Bruce are standing in an awkwardly formed semi-circle. “How do we know that they know he’s here?” Tony asks pedantically when he gets no response from her, “And holy hell why is there a dead body on my coffee table?” He turns an accusing stare on Natasha. “*How* is there a dead body on my coffee table? Did you kill someone?”

“He dropped in.” Clint says drolly, waving a hand in the direction of the balcony, which is when Tony sees the trail of blood left behind from someone dragging a body into his apartment and leaving it on the goddamn coffee table. How is he even friends with these people? From the irritated look Natasha gives him Tony can only assume that he’s making an inappropriate joke, which means...

“What, from the sky?” He demands, taking a half step back from the body in alarm.

“No, the spaceship.” Clint quips back snarkily, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Don’t joke about shit like that, man.” Sam shakes his head, his eyes wide and fixed on the rather mangled body. “I’m in no way ready to be dealing with ET.”

It does rather look like something from one of Ridley Scott’s more psychotic moments: bloody and mangled and misshapen. “Can we go back to how he ended up on my coffee table?” Tony demands, his patience and his temper completely non-existent. What little he’s been able to keep over the last few days is never going to be enough to shake off what he’s just witnessed.

“Sam brought him in,” Barton says. Tony gives Wilson the hairy eyeball - clearly he’s underestimated the guy.

“You know even Pepper’s cat waited a few weeks before trying to buy my affection by leaving dead things on my furniture.” Tony says accusingly.

“Pepper had a cat?” Clint asks.

Natasha nods. “Persian Blue,” she explains.

“Dead! Body!” Tony yells. Pepper’s evil feline companion - who now lives in Fresno with her aunt - is in no way relevant to the fact that apparently HYDRA are now dropping bodies out of planes. Contrary to popular opinion, and even in a world as weird and sinister as theirs, people don’t just randomly fall out of the sky. And if they do, Tony’s usually either the why or the how.

“Good aim.” Bruce mutters, his nose wrinkling as he bends down to inspect the body. “But are we certain HYDRA are involved? Dropping a body onto a specific building is not exactly easy...maybe he just got really unlucky and fell out of a plane?” Sometimes Bruce is the most hopefully optimistic guy on the planet, more so even than Steve, and sometimes he’s a floating black cloud of pessimism and gloom. Tony’s usually pretty good at navigating both, but his nerves are currently frayed.

“Except there is this,” Natasha says darkly, crouching down beside Bruce and pulling up the body’s blood spattered shirt, not at all squeamish. “Call it a wild stab in the dark.” The body is a mess, unrecognizable thanks to the impact, but Tony can still make out the emblem that’s been carved into his chest.

"I hate these people," he says. And he does. More than he thinks he's hated anyone in a long time. What they've done to Barnes is unforgivable. What they continue to do to the world is no less so. That they grew to power once more under the protection of SHIELD and under his father's nose, well that just makes shit personal. "Why are they still alive? And when are we doing something about that?"

"He's not the only victim." Natasha says grimly. "I spoke to Hill. Of her contacts in the NYPD says they've found seven more bodies over the last twelve hours. Each shot in the back of the head execution style with HYDRA's calling card carved into their skin. As for this guy, according to your scanners, there was an unregistered 747 overhead six minutes ago. No one is claiming ownership and the Air Force's already tracking the flight plan. Colonel Rhodes says he'll been in touch with a point of origin within the hour."

Tony nods absently, glad that Rhodey's on the problem. If you want something doing you either have to do it yourself, or trust in one of the half dozen people who have proved themselves competent. With Rhodey on the case, Tony's not worried about getting an answer.

He is, however, worried about blood stains. Have they not already discussed this multiple times?"

"Are we certain HYDRA are behind this?" Bruce asks, sounding more desperate to see anyone but HYDRA be responsible than Tony could have imagined. He's clearly not taking any of this as well as his calm demeanor would indicate, and Tony can't blame him for being freaked out. He's not worrying about a green rampage, but he is worrying about his friend. He's worrying about all of them. "Who's to say these guys don't work for them and someone's cleaning up the streets? In which case, I vote we send them gift baskets."

"*Unlikely, sir.*" JARVIS pipes up, thus proving that Tony's been right all along and his AI is actually having an affair with the good doctor, and not even behind his back, "*My records indicate that the body belongs to one Harold Zipler, formally a security guard at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C.*"

"So probably not HYDRA." Sam puts out there, running his hand over his head in distress. "I'mma join you with the hate." He says to Tony.

"I saw him at the exhibit." Tony doesn't hear either Barnes or Steve approach and swears under his breath. They both look terrible. Steve's eyes are red and sore looking, while Barnes is so hunched in on himself he's taking up half his usual space, despite the chunk of metal strapped to his chest. Tony aches for them. He wants to give them the space and the peace they need to try and repair all the damage done in their lives. Tony's not naive, he knows it's not in the cards; men like Steve and Barnes aren't that lucky.

"You know him?" Natasha asks, looking up at Barnes as she taps away a message on her cell.

"No." Barnes says, approaching cautiously with Steve hovering so close by that they kept bumping elbows. "He was there." As always there is a sparseness to Barnes' speech pattern, an economy of words that see him saying as little as possible.

It doesn't escape Tony that HYDRA has chosen someone Barnes encountered to send their message. "Get Hill to forward me the names of the other victims." Tony tells Natasha. Maybe from there they can crosscheck the path Barnes took and try work limitation. He doesn't think for half a second that HYDRA was able to track Barnes where Steve failed, which means they must have another way of monitoring his location. The tracker Bruce found in his arm is still registering as offline, which suggests they might have another way to keep track of his position, and that doesn't sit well with Tony at all.

Barnes crouches down besides Zipler's body and touches the bloody carving on his chest cautiously. "I know this." He says, his brows drawn together in thought.

"You've seen this before?" Natasha asks him. She doesn't ask have you done it before but Tony hears it anyway. And by the flicker behind Barnes's eyes, he hears it too.

Barnes shakes his head. "No, but I know it." Tony's not sure what that means. It could be is just some random bit of intel HYDRA have stashed in his brain, which could mean there are multiple levels to Barnes's programming, levels they don't know how to access or unravel, as much a part of him as the metal arm they screwed into his shoulder. That's something else to worry about. Who knows what landmines are buried in Barnes' mind?

"And 'it' is?" Barton prompts, trying to draw Barnes back from the distance that was growing in his gaze. That's happening more and more often, and Tony's pretty damn certain that watching the videos did nothing to help. Something is changing in Barnes, there can be no doubt about that. Tony just wishes he he could tell whether it was for better or worse, even as the small, lucid part of his brain that sounds like JARVIS reminds him there's nothing he can do no matter which end of the spectrum Barnes ends up at.

Barnes blinks, slowly, shakes himself from his thoughts. "A message."

"Got that part." Tony says testily. "Though for future reference, I am on Twitter." He says that more to the sky outside and the invisible presence of HYDRA than out of any belief Barnes will get the reference.

"So what?" Steve asks, his voice thick with anger and his eyes narrowed. He looks like he's on the verge of a fight and his whole stance looms threatening. Steve's a big guy and being physically imposing doesn't come hard to him, but he often carries himself like someone much smaller in an effort to be more approachable. He's not doing that right now. Right now he looks every inch of the solidly built super soldier that he is. "Is this supposed to be some kind of threat? 'Hand yourself over or we kill people'?" Barnes doesn't say anything, just stares at him. "It is, isn't it? No. No." Steve's already shaking his head.

"Steve-" Barnes says, rising up from his crouched position with a fluidity that even Tony's knees don't grant him, and he's not ninety five years old.

Steve crosses his arms over his chest and glares down at Barnes, unyielding and solid. "That's not happening."

"Steve's right," Natasha says firmly. "You're safest here."

"But you're not." Barnes frowns.

"Oh, we can take care of ourselves," Tony growls. "In fact, you know what? I say let them try. Anyone that makes it past Rogers - and I'm going to go out on a limb and say that's highly unlikely - I will happily blast so far into oblivion they'll be able to wave at Thor as they fly past Asgard."

"They know I'm here." Barnes reminds them.

"So what?" Steve demands. "They bring the fight to us and they're going to regret it."

"You've already been hurt because of me." Barnes says, regret in his eyes if not in his voice.

Steve opens his mouth to respond, but Natasha beats him to it. "Exactly." She says, not pulling her punches. "And if you go out there alone and they get their hands on you, they will wipe you, just

like they did before, and they'll put you back in the field to finish the mission. You want to risk hurting Steve again? Or do you think that this time you might actually kill him?"

There's no cruelty in her voice, and no anger in Steve's face as he steps between her and Barnes, but Barnes looks like she slapped him. He seems to be more pained by her words than he was when Pierce actually hit him and that says more than anything that she's gotten through to the fundamental part of him that is here purely because of Steve. "Bucky, you have to let us help you." Steve begs.

"I thought he was a good person." Barnes says frustratedly. "James Barnes was a good person."

They have all fallen silent, their eyes fixed on Bucky and Steve, all of them perversely grateful that they are not the ones having to have this conversation. Tony doesn't like the way Barnes talks about himself as if James Barnes was a completely different being. It sits under his skin uneasily, not yet fitting into place.

"You are." Steve says with equal emotion. "You're a good man."

"Then I should do this, shouldn't I?" Barnes looks so confused, as if the concepts of right and wrong are still foreign to him, but that that confusion won't stop him trying so hard to be what he thinks he should. Or what he thinks Steve wants him to be.

The problem is, Steve can't really win this argument. If he says yes, that Barnes should not let innocent people die in his place, then they risk Barnes taking off and being killed - or worse, captured. If he says no and convinces Barnes to stay, the childlike, damaged part of Barnes' mind that is trying to piece together who he was will only grow more confused at the conflicting stimulus.

"These people aren't your responsibility." Steve says, choosing a third option. Tony almost wants to kiss him. This is why Steve is their leader. He always finds another way. "This is on HYDRA, not you, and until we know more about what we are dealing with we're all in a vulnerable position. We'll work this out together, but we can only do that if you let us." In one short speech, Steve both includes Barnes in their rag-tag little group and hands him back his agency. He puts the ball in Barnes' court.

Barnes shakes his head and turns away from them. It's the most he's done to actively express his feelings in a physical way, and though it pains him, Tony can see Steve reel in the desire to pull him back.

"Deal with this." Tony tells Sam, who is now standing between Natasha and Clint. The guy is officially one of them now which means he doesn't get the guest pass, he gets the resident's chores.

"Where are you going?" Barton calls after him.

Tony's already inside, "I'm going to find something we can nail these assholes with." He says, reaching into his pocket as his phone starts to vibrate.

"Sir," JARVIS says, "I am unable to determine the origin of this call. I would advise you not to answer."

Tony doesn't listen. He knows - if not the exact details - who is calling. HYDRA have sent their first note, now they are following up on delivery.

"Who the hell is this?" Tony demands, wanting a name to put to the shots he is firing in his head.

“Mr Stark.” He’s only heard the man speak the once, but there is no mistaking Lukin’s voice on the end of the line.

“You’ve got some nerve, pal.” Tony snarls, his grip on the phone threatening to crack the screen. He moves further away from the main group, mostly so Barnes won’t overhear and Steve won’t do something stupid. Tony’s got the monopoly on stupid as it is.

“You are upset,” Lukin says, his voice radiating sympathy. “Forgive me, some of my colleagues are a little overzealous. It was not my intention to cause you any distress.” It’s easy to remember him being the one who spoke to Barnes in soothing, soft tones, promising him that he was safe and would come to no harm. The thing is, Tony doesn’t buy it for a second, and unlike Barnes he’s not brain damaged, traumatized or bolted helplessly to a lab bench.

“Drop the act,” Tony says coldly, “what do you want?”

“You know what I want, Mr Stark.” Tony hates to give him any credit, but he does as told and leaves the cajoling words behind, speaking bluntly instead.

“Yeah. Never going to happen.” Tony says, carefully enunciating each word. “So if you want him, you’re going to have to come and take him.”

“I would rather it not come to that.” Lukin responds.

“Yeah, I bet. How does it feel knowing you’re the one person on Earth who has succeeded in pissing off every single one of the Avengers?” He includes Thor on principle. All their Asgardian friend would need to do is take one look at Steve before the righteous anger would set in. He’s getting a little desperate now, even though it has only been a few hours since Bruce sent out the call. They could seriously do with some other-worldly intervention here.

“Your little tag-team of superheroes is not my concern, Mr Stark. And soon you’ll have enough to worry about without any additional threats from me.”

“Really? Because *that* sounds like a threat.” Tony snaps. He knows he has attracted Natasha’s attention, and he knows Steve at least can hear what is being said, but he’s too focused on Barnes, who is looking very pale and sickly under the artificial lights.

“Has he started to regain his memories yet?” Lukin asks. “He will, slowly. If he remains out of cryostasis for too long, he will begin to suffer from emotional bleeds. It is why we had to contain him as we did. The last time we allowed him an extended period of unrestricted time, he killed another agent without even knowing why. I would hate for you or your friends to get caught in the blast zone.”

“Yeah,” Tony says sardonically, “I bet you would.”

“He is dangerous, Mr Stark.” Lukin says, sounding earnest and genuine. It makes Tony’s skin crawl to think of Barnes being exposed to him when he was in such a vulnerable state. It’s no wonder the damage done to his mind is so extensive.

“So am I.” Tony responds acidly.

“He will turn on you.” Lukin promises. “You have the data you stole from my facility. Just look.”

“Oh, I’ve looked.” Tony says, the sounds of Barnes’ screams still ringing in his ears. “We’re done.”

Tony moves to disconnect the call. “Your father underestimated him.” Lukin says, “Do not make the same mistake.” It’s Lukin who has the last word. Tony hates him for that, as well.

He drops the phone onto the counter and turns toward the stairs seek sanctuary in his lab.

He doesn’t want to think about Howard’s involvement in all this. Not when it's looking less and less likely that his father could have claimed ignorance.

He’s a certified genius, and it doesn’t take an IQ as high as his to question whether there was more to his parents’ death than a simple car accident. Even at the time there had been speculation and rumors. He’s had his doubts. He’s always had his doubts, and now, after the revelation of HYDRA’s continued existence, these doubts look more founded than ever.

There had always been people who wanted Howard dead, even before Tony’s birth-- one of the perks of being a figure who so routinely divided public opinion. Tony had thought about it, questioned it, but there had never been any evidence that it was anything other than an accident.

He’d done a good job not thinking about it in a long time, and he’s not thinking about it now.

Not Howard’s involvement in SHIELD, with HYDRA, or with Barnes.

And he’s not thinking about the fact that Barnes, for all intents and purposes, is the weapon created to do just that - the ghost who doesn’t exist.

He knows all this.

But that doesn’t mean he needs to address it. Not now. Not ever. He does a damn fine job of never thinking about it, or at least he has been up until seeing Howard’s signature on that fucking document.

But that doesn’t have to change. He can deflect. He can bury. He can-

“Alright, Stark,” Barton says grimly, stepping into Tony’s personal space and hauling him out onto the balcony by the elbow, not stopping until their only company is the inky sky and the sounds of traffic below. “Spill.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This part is not a happy part. It can't even pretend to be a happy part.

Much love as always to Titheniel who pushes me out of my comfort zone and makes the emotion so much more real.

And much love to you guys for all your kindness and encouragement - I'm completely blown away by how supportive you've all be, so thank you!

"Alright, Stark," Barton says grimly, stepping into Tony's personal space and hauling him out onto the balcony by the elbow, not stopping until their only company is the inky sky and the sounds of traffic below. "Spill. And don't give me that 'spill what?' bullshit."

"You're a horribly nosey individual, aren't you?"

"And you're shitty at deflection." Clint snorts.

"Am not." Tony pouts." Barton raises an eyebrow as if to say *are we really doing this*, and Tony greatly regrets ever deciding to let him in their super secret boy band.

"Come on Tony," Barton pushes, his voice becoming much gentler as the honest worry in his eyes shines out from behind the snarky facade. "Talk to me man. There's something going on in that crazy head of yours that's eatin' you up."

"Aside from all this?" Tony tries one last time to deflect, waving an arm around him to indicate everything that's happened over the past few days.

"We've dealt with crazy crap before." Clint says seriously. "You've never had a problem staying focused, not until shit gets personal." It's scary, how much those bright, sharp eyes of his actually see. "So tell me. How exactly is this personal for you? And don't you dare mention your goddamn coffee table, or so help me I will dropkick you off this roof."

Tony wants to keep up the wiseass remarks. He wants to keep that safety in distance, but the problem is that when you start letting people into your life, when you start trusting them with it, it

becomes real hard to draw a line. He trusts Barton to have his back no matter how dire the situation, so surely trusting him with the truth of all this is nothing?

It isn't, not really, but Tony's never been very good at asking for help.

"I need to show you something." It will be much easier to just let Barton see the file rather than to try explain why his head is such a mess. Barton can draw his own conclusions, Tony won't need to spell it out for him.

Barton looks like he wants to ask, but merely nods his head and follows Tony back down to the lab. He shoots Natasha a quick glance that seems to express a volume of information and no one follows them, too caught up in their own thing. Natasha, Bruce and Sam are pouring over dossiers JARVIS has provided on the murdered men and women, while Steve has Barnes to one side, talking to him quietly.

Tony doesn't say anything else, not trusting himself not to just start rambling excessively. When they reach the lab he boots up the databanks, pulls up the file and rocks back on his heels as Barton reads it over.

"Ah." He says eventually. "You know, it's not necessarily what it looks like."

"That's what Bruce says."

"Doc's a smart guy. Maybe you should listen to him?" Clint's got him pinned in the corner of his gaze, assessing. Anyone who doesn't think he's a scarily smart guy should reassess their judgement. Barton may not be book smart, not in the traditional sense, but he's people savvy and wicked sharp with his observations. "So what else?" He asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Who says there is any-- right, right. Jesus. Who pulled your tail feathers this morning?" Barton doesn't dignify the remark with a response, letting the silence stretch between them until Tony can't bear it any longer. "I think HYDRA killed my parents." He's expecting something from Barton, be it sympathy or outrage, or even a shake of the head as he tells Tony he's paranoid. He gets nothing, which says everything. "You already know that."

To his credit, Barton doesn't lie to him. "You remember when I told you about getting shot by the Winter Soldier?"

“You said it was on one of your first ops.” Tony nods.

Barton takes several paces away from him and then back again, as if he’s sorting the words out in his mind. “It was ‘91,” he says. The same year Tony’s parents died. Tony suddenly feels cold. He’s been brewing thoughts in his head for the past few hours over how HYDRA and the Winter Soldier might have been involved, but he’s never for a second thought Clint could be as well. Somehow that hits harder than anything else. “I wasn’t assigned to your parents,” Clint promises. “I was covering their head of security.”

“Jimmy Dugan?” Tony frowns. Timothy Dugan, known affectionately as ‘Dum Dum,’ had been a Howling Commando just like Bucky and Steve. He’d died a few years before Howard and Maria, but his son had been every inch the soldier his old man was. James Dugan had served in Vietnam, Korea and Cambodia before a ten year stint in and out of Iran and the Persian Gulf. He’d taken over as Howard’s head of security in the spring of ‘90. He’d been the one to show Tony how to properly throw a punch.

Barton nods. “I wasn’t told much at the time,” he admits, “only that Dugan was a high priority suspect in a national security breach and I needed to put him out of commission before the situation got worse. I was readying to take him out when I got shot.”

“You said that your target had been reassigned.” Tony accuses.

“He was.” Barton agrees. “They told me he was no longer considered a threat so I didn’t think anything of it. Then six months later the car he’s driving goes over a cliff with your parents in the back seat. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

“You think he was with HYDRA?” Tony asks, unable to get his head around the concept but knowing that there must be a lot of people feeling the same way after their grand reveal.

Barton shakes his head. “Nothing I saw indicated that he was involved in either HYDRA or SHIELD, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. I don’t think so.” That brings Tony little peace.

“You think the Winter Soldier killed them?” Tony asks. He’s already half acknowledged the fact but having it spelled out to him doesn’t dull the flare of pain in any way.

“I think Howard Stark was the target all along.” Barton nods. “They just used Dugan to get eyes on him.”

“I killed your father?” Tony jumps a foot in the air at the sound of Barnes’ voice. There’s no sign of Steve and Tony wonders how Barnes escaped down here unsupervised even as he clutches the lab bench, steadying himself.

“That’s it. We are getting you a bell.” He says it half to hide the fact that his heart is beating a mile a minute. This is the man who killed his family, (maybe, maybe) only it’s not. It’s confusing as hell and it makes Tony’s head pound.

It doesn’t escape Tony that Barnes doesn’t sound troubled by the question he just asked. He doesn’t sound much of anything at all, which seems to be his default setting. He does start to frown though when Tony can’t bring himself to respond, his lips pulling down at the corners and his eyes narrowing in thought.

“Does the Good Captain know that you’re here?” Tony says as he turns around, and despite every self preservation instinct screaming at him that presenting his back to a trained master assassin is a fairly crappy way to keep oneself alive, picks up a spanner and starts adjusting the tension on DUM-E’s hydraulic hinge. It doesn’t need any work but it’s literally the first thing he can get his hands on. He can’t look at Barnes right now. It’s not his fault, not even a little bit, and that’s why Tony needs a precious few seconds to steady his nerve before he says or does something he’ll regret.

“You look like him.” Barnes says almost absently. It’s the knowledge that this may very well be the first time Barnes voiced anything without being prompted, asked or cajoled that makes Tony turn around, his smile only slightly forced. He’s not taking this out on Barnes, he’s *not*. He’s not.

“You look like him.” Barnes repeats. “He was a real son of a bitch.” He speaks so offhandedly, so absently, that it’s only really the look on his face that brings Tony up short.

Tony almost drops his spanner as Barnes blinks rapidly and sucks in a short breath. “You remember my dad?” Tony asks. It’s a more emotional response than he intends, and he’s not sure if it comes from a place of desperation, horror, or irritation that once again Howard is involved in things he has no damn right to be.

The first comment, that Tony looks like his dad, well that could be attributed to any number of images Barnes might have seen of Howard at some point. It's the second part, the casual commentary, that's what makes Tony hesitate. Barnes has been almost painfully submissive to all of them right from the start. He's never once voiced his own opinion on anything, and certainly not in a negative way.

"I-" Barnes breaks off, his expression wholly unlike anything Tony's seen from him outside of that damn video. He looks utterly petrified. "I-"

"You okay?" Tony keeps his voice and body language as unthreatening and gentle as he can. It's like he and Barnes are the only people in the room but Tony is the only one who can feel the mounting tension.

"He was a real son of a bitch." Barnes repeats, as if he is testing the words and the memory associated with that sentence. What strikes Tony the most though is the subtle inflections, the syntax of his words and the ever so slight twang of Brooklyn in his voice. This is, he realizes with wonder, the very first time he's meeting *Bucky*.

The constant battle they have been seeing between the Winter Soldier's blank slate emptiness and the new personality that has been emerging now he's out from under HYDRA's thumb has a new, active participant. The quiet thoughts of Bucky, who until recently has been mostly dormant but for the very deepest of instincts, are finally breaking to the surface.

Tony gets ridiculously excited for all of five seconds as he briefly glimpses a happy ending in all this, but it doesn't last.

Something flickers behind Bucky's eyes and Tony sees for the very first time the absolute torture that has been inflicted on him. It leaves him breathless, almost longing for that blankness once more because anything is better than this kind of pain, surely?

Tony hasn't noticed Clint leaving the room, not until he's back again, Steve hot on his tail.

"Bucky?" Steve prompts, his eyes wide with worry.

Bucky - and it's Bucky still behind those pain filled eyes- jerks his head up at the sound of Steve's voice. "Steve?" He chokes, so much emotion in that one word that it makes Tony physically ache.

He can see the exact moment Steve understands what is happening. He steps forward just as Bucky doubles over, hands clutching at his head and a ragged, tormented scream breaking free from his throat.

Steve reaches him as his knees give way and wraps both arms around Bucky in an attempt to comfort him. Tony's caught completely off guard when Bucky howls in terror and swings up, punching Steve hard enough in the jaw to knock him back several steps. "No!" He screams, his flesh and bone hand still clutching his head and his metal arm held out in front of him defensively.

Steve shakes off the hit, ignoring the blood on his split lip. "Bucky, it's me. It's Steve. You're okay."

"No!" Bucky screams again. "No, no, no!" Tony has no idea what or who he is speaking to, only that he suddenly raises his head, a mask of crazed fear clouding his features, and suddenly Tony can strongly identify with a deer caught in the oncoming headlights of a Mack truck.

He has, he realizes belatedly, made the fatal error of placing himself between Bucky and the exit.

There's a moment of stillness between all four of them as they wait, hoping desperately that Bucky can be reasoned with. Steve tries again, his hand outstretched, "Bucky please, it's me."

And Bucky snaps. He charges towards the exit - towards Tony - overturning furniture as he goes, so frightened and panicked that he doesn't try going around the obstacles in his path but just plows right through them.

Tony doesn't get the chance to move. Barton tangles a hand in the front of Tony's shirt and physically hauls him out of the line of danger a split second before Steve tackles Bucky around the waist and brings them both crashing to the floor.

Bucky is still screaming, still alternating between clutching his head and trying desperately to fight his way past Steve. Tony's seen him in action, seen how graceful and efficient he is when he fights, and this is nothing like it. There's no co-ordination in his limbs, no strategy to his attack. That doesn't stop him being brutally effective though and Barton makes a move to help as Bucky's head snaps back and Steve's nose is suddenly gushing blood.

“Stand down!” Steve yells at Clint, ignoring the blood as he grits his teeth and uses his body weight to pin Bucky’s right arm behind his back. He hooks his leg over Bucky’s flailing metal arm and wraps his forearm around his neck from behind. It’s a brutal sleeper hold to put anyone in, especially someone who is so clearly as terrified as Bucky is, and Tony feels almost compelled to protest. He knows Steve is trying to stop Bucky from hurting anyone, or himself, but it’s horrifying to watch him having to resort to such tactics. Tony can just about hear Steve’s voice over the sound of Bucky’s screams, and it’s a constant liturgy of “Please, Bucky, it’s me, it’s Steve. I don’t want to hurt you, please, please...” And somehow worse, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Steve hasn’t been putting any pressure on Bucky’s throat, but the longer they struggle, the clearer it becomes that he’s going to have to, that Bucky’s not going to stop fighting unless they force him to, and Tony would give everything he has to erase the agony on Steve’s face as he whispers apologies in Bucky’s ear. Since he is already hyperventilating and as exhausted as he already is, it only takes a minute for the fight to drain out of his body as he struggles to breathe.

Steve doesn’t wait a second longer, loosening his hold and arranging them so he can wrap his arms around Bucky in a more comforting and protective way.

Bucky’s screams have become sobs, his hands clutching at his head again now they are free, fingers tangled in his long, messy hair. Steve doesn’t let that stop him. He pulls Bucky in even closer, until he can rest his cheek on the top of his head, one hand curled around his shoulders, the other protectively resting on the back of his neck.

“I’m here.” Steve whispers. “You’re not alone. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.”

Tony can just about hear the pained whimpers that Bucky makes as his sobbing softens. He shares a helpless look with Barton, who seems to be torn between horrified sympathy and his own memories.

“Steve?” Bucky sounds just as lost as he did the first time he whispered Steve’s name, but there’s something almost hopeful to the childlike tone of his voice.

“I’m here,” Steve repeats. “I got you.”

“You’re here.” Bucky breathes in wonder, his fingers moving from his head to clutch at Steve’s arms. “Oh god...” He breaks off, then, “It hurts,” he whispers brokenly.

Tony can't see Steve's face from behind the tangle of Bucky's hair, but his voice carries easily. "I know," he says, regret a real, tangible thing in his words, "I'm sorry. I'm so goddamn sorry, Buck." He rubs his fingers soothingly over the back of Bucky's neck, oblivious to everything else in the room. Tony's not sure what to do, so he ends up standing there, gaping foolishly. It's probably a good thing Pepper insists on him making his labs soundproof after one too many explosions or else they'd be dealing with twice the number of helpless onlookers.

Suddenly, Bucky freezes.

"Bucky?" Steve asks, worriedly. Tony can see him loosen his hold on Bucky in case it is frightening him more, but all that does is allow him the movement to jerk sideways and vomit violently on the ground.

He's not eaten much, even while he's been with them, so after only a few minutes it is only bile he is retching up. Every time Steve tries to place a comforting hand on his shoulder Bucky jerks away from him with a soft cry. Eventually Steve stops trying and just rocks back on his heels, looking helpless as he waits for something to change in Bucky's posture.

Eventually it comes. Bucky doesn't move out of his hunched position, but he speaks up softly. "Did I kill him?" He asks, speaking to Tony not Steve.

Tony can't pretend that Barnes hadn't walked in on he and Barton saying exactly that, he can't lie his way out of this. But while Barnes had initially sounded only confused and a little curious, Bucky now sounds like the answer will gut him wide open.

Unfortunately Tony's silence speaks as loud as his words, even as Steve asks, "What are you talking about? Killed who?"

Bucky keens miserably and curls even tighter. Alarmed, Steve tries once more to comfort him, only this time he's shoved back violently for his efforts.

It's a rough swing and he's exhausted, so it does little more than push Steve off balance, but Bucky swears violently and scrambles away from him. "Don't touch me!" He screams, his eyes darting around the room wildly. Tony knows that Barnes and the Winter Soldier have already scoped out all the exit points, but neither of them are in the driving seat right now and it's with a bitter appreciation for the irony that he realizes they are actually in more danger from Bucky than they are the mechanized killing machine they turned him in to. The Winter Soldier is obedient in all things. Bucky is terrified and half out of his mind.

“Bucky-“ Steve holds out his hands cajolingly, looking so pained, so patient, that Tony half hopes Bucky will give in and crawl back into his embrace.

He doesn't, instead he scrambles back even further, until his back hits the wall and his whole body flinches violently. “I killed him.” Bucky whispers, his eyes wide and filled with horror, “I killed him. I killed him.”

“Killed who?” Steve asks desperately. “Bucky please-“

“I hated him!” Bucky screams suddenly, his eyes ablaze with fire, “but I never... I can't...”

He's hyperventilating badly now, his whole body shaking with the violence of the emotions tearing through his system. He's in real danger of passing out if he doesn't calm down and Tony's just about ready to start thinking about tranquilizers when he sees the change falling over Bucky's face.

It happens quickly in comparison. One minute Bucky is about to shatter apart at the seams, and the next his body is utterly still and silent. The anguish in his eyes falls behind a shadow of serene blankness as Bucky retreats from the horror of his reality back into the safety provided by his programming.

He's gone further into himself than Tony has yet seen, remaining still and pliant as Steve forces back his own tears and gently pulls him up to his feet. “Bucky?” There's no response when Steve curls his palm over Barnes' jaw, but he lets Steve take his hand and follows obediently as Steve leads him towards the stairs. “Come on, let's get you settled down,” Steve whispers in anguish. Barnes says nothing.

Tony and Clint can only stare at them both in sympathy and sadness. There's nothing they can say.

Steve hesitates before leaving the lab. He half turns back and says, “Do you know who he was talking about?” He asks.

Tony can't find the words to respond and has to force himself to answer. “Not a clue.”

Steve nods absently and finally wipes the blood off his face with his sleeve, "I'm sorry about..." Steve doesn't finish the sentence, but Tony's already waving his hands, his trademark grin back on his face, even as if it feels like it's made out of glass.

"What for? You know rebuilds get me going. This is great, this is just what I needed. I don't even have to find a plausible excuse to run past Pepper." Steve looks at Tony as if he knows exactly what Tony's doing, and Tony sighs, the lightness seeping out of his voice as he tentatively grasps Steve's shoulder, "Don't. It's fine. We got this. Just...look after him."

"Thanks, Tony." Steve whispers as he leaves with Barnes, so genuinely grateful Tony feels like throwing up himself.

Tony can't respond. He sees Barton hesitate, torn between giving him space or offering comfort, but then he shakes his head and tucks his hands into his armpits, making himself smaller. "You got this?" He asks softly, his own expression haunted. Tony nods absently and Clint makes himself scarce - no doubt seeking out Natasha.

Tony looks around the lab, looking for something he knows isn't there. When no answer magically provides itself, he flips a table full of equipment over in anger.

And when that doesn't help either, he starts picking everything back up again. There's a crackle of lightning and a flash of thunder outside, a sign Tony's been waiting for with an almost fervent hope. If anything can help Barnes get his memories back, perhaps it is Thor.

Now though, now he's seen Bucky and witnessed first hand the trauma written deep into his bones, Tony's not even sure that helping him regain the memories he's lost is the best thing for him.

It's certainly not the kindest.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony spends (wastes) a good hour cleaning up the mess in his lab, helped (hindered) by DUM-E, who knows something is wrong and keeps trying to pass Tony Kleenexes. He can't find it in himself to tell his bot to stop, and ends up with both pockets full of tissues before he finally resolves to head back upstairs to rejoin the rest of the group.

He can't hide down here forever, not when there are things to be done, and certainly not when Thor has just arrived. He should feel slightly more guilty about being a shit host, but he's confident that between Bruce, Natasha and Clint, Thor's not still hanging out on the balcony, waiting to be let in.

--no one is saying that we're going to do it." Tony can hear the sound of Bruce's soothing voice through the wall and mentally prepares himself, but not even Pepper's newfound love for yoga and meditation could've prepared him for the sight of Bruce standing between Barton and Thor, his hands outstretched as he tries to calm down a clearly furious Clint. It was only a matter of time, Tony supposes, before something exploded there, but he's a little surprised to see Thor be the target for Barton's anger.

"But you're heavily fucking implying it!" Barton snarls, jabbing a finger in Thor's direction. It says a lot about how far they have come and how much they instinctively trust one another that this level of anger and confrontation is unfolding in front of Bruce without any concern that he might lose control.

"Whoa! Whoa! I leave you unsupervised and this is the kind of welcoming committee we end up with? For shame!" Tony nods at Thor who returns the gesture. "Good to see you, thanks for coming."

"I apologize for taking so long." Thor says genially.

"Nah, it's all good. Can't imagine the cell reception is great in Asgard." Tony shrugs before turning back to Clint. "Now, you want to tell me exactly what bee crawled into your bonnet, Barton?"

Clint doesn't respond right away, but he's shaking with cold fury so whatever it is has clearly got him twisted up in a bad way.

"It was not my intention to cause you distress," Thor says to him when no answer is given, making it clear from his expression that such things were furthest from his mind. "My words were careless, forgive me."

"Can we rewind, please?" Tony asks. That's the problem when there are so many of them all in one place, all doing different things with different people at different times. There's so much overlapping and catch up that he needs to be extra cautious to ensure he has all the facts, as and when they are revealed.

"We filled Thor in on our current situation." Bruce explains. "SHIELD, HYDRA, Bucky, all of it." He shoots Barton a look that's part frustrated, part sympathetic as Clint stalks over to Tony's wet bar and pours himself a seriously liberal helping of scotch. "He says that there was something on

Asgard once that could have helped with Bucky's memory loss."

"The Cosmic Cube can transform any wish into reality." Thor adds. "In the early years of my father's reign it was considered one of the Weapons of Desire, for the consequences of its use could be catastrophic should the heart of its user not prove pure."

"So we give it to Steve," Tony shrugs. "Guy's heart's made of diamonds and unicorns." He's not one hundred percent serious at this point, obviously there are other factors that need to be taken into consideration - serious ones - but Barton slams the glass decanter down on the bar and shoots Tony a glare that is as betrayed as it is furious.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" He snaps. "After what we just saw, you want to use magic to scramble his head further?"

Tony gets what this is about a split second before Thor does and he holds back, letting Thor take the lead on this one. "This is not the same power as the Tesseract." He says gently, "What was done to you was cruel and malicious - the Cube is merely a manifestation of will. It is not harmful of its own."

Clint's expression is angry and ugly. "Right. Believe me, I know all about the manifestation of will. The Chiatauri's, *Loki's*--"

Thor looks gutted, as he always seems to do when faced with the consequences of his brother's actions. It must be impossible, loving someone who has caused such misery and horror. "Loki is dead, Barton. He cannot cause you more harm."

Tony almost kicks himself when he catches the look on Barton's face. Tony knows of Barton's nightmares, his fears that if Loki returns he will be enslaved once more. At the time Barton had confessed as much to Tony because he was drunk, and because Tony was a virtual stranger. Now, as Barton's friend, he can see the fracture lines beneath the surface even clearer. He'd heard as much from Selvig after Thor had been spotted battling yet another alien ship, this time in England. By the time Tony arrived Thor was already back on Asgard, but he'd spent a few days swapping notes with Erik and Jane. He knew about Loki's death but in his foolishness, had never imagined Barton would not know. He had assumed that SHIELD would fill him in. Obviously they hadn't.

Barton's jaw works furiously as he reigns in his emotions - shock, relief, shame, they're all clear as day to Tony. Then he looks up at Thor and says in a tight voice, "I'm sorry for your loss."

Thor's responding smile is pained, but particularly earnest. He'd been quite awkward around Barton the last time they were all together, clearly torn between giving him space and wanting to fix the damage Loki had caused.

"Do we even know the Cube would work?" Bruce asks, bringing them back on topic. "Seems like one hell of a gamble to make."

"It would work," Thor answers, "but whether the gains outweigh the risk, I would not know without seeing your friend."

"I'll go get them," Tony offers. "No point arguing any more without Steve here anyway." It feels a little sinister, taking Barnes' will out of the equation, but as it stands he simply has none, and they have to trust Steve to make the right choices in his place.

Tony spots Natasha talking softly on her cellphone in Russian, and she just points Tony towards one of the spare bedrooms, carrying on her conversation seamlessly. She's been standing watch,

probably more to soothe her own nerves than out of any real need. He makes a mental note to talk to her when he gets the chance. After he's talked to Clint. And to Steve.

Pushing thoughts of how monumentally messed up they all are to the back of his mind, Tony slips through the open door and hesitates.

Tony can see Sam standing by the window, his gaze turned out into the night. He turns when Tony enters and nods his head.

Steve has his back to the headboard, one leg propped up on the bed, the other resting on the floor. Barnes is laid out beside him, breathing softly, his head on Steve's thigh and his hand curled around his knee. For a second Tony thinks he's sleeping, but he's not. He's possibly not even resting, he's just staring into space, lost in his own mind. Tony can't tell if the way he is clinging to Steve is indicator of the part of Bucky that now knows he is there, or if it is simply a childlike need for comfort shining through.

Tony's struck once more by the juxtaposition. It's why he can't see Barnes and Steve in the same light, even with the similarities in the evolutions of their bodies from human to so much more. Steve was created to be a soldier - the perfect soldier - but none of that is in expense of his mind. He makes the judgement calls, the strategies and the plans of attack, and he executes them with that super-human body of his. He's a soldier, The Soldier.

Barnes is just a really sharp knife. Utterly deadly when in the right hands - and still dangerous as hell when not - but without a will of his own. He could bring the world to its knees if he chose to, but he can't even feed himself unless he's told to do so.

"You need something?" Steve asks as he absently cards his fingers through Barnes' hair. It's loose and damp, and he's dressed in fresh clothes, so Steve has obviously cleaned him up since the lab. He sounds fairly calm, almost level-headed and relaxed. The blood on his face has been cleaned away and he's holding it together in a way that Tony finds remarkable. The guy is a damn miracle really. Tony wouldn't be holding up even half as well.

Tony realizes he's been caught staring. "Big guy's here," he says. "Says he might have some ideas, but he needs to take a look a Bucky first."

"Big guy?" Sam asks from his spot by the window.

"Thor," Steve says, standing and pulling Barnes up gently.

'Thor', Sam mouths silently, his eyes wide. He's clearly wondering how exactly this has become his life but he shakes it off and shrugs his shoulders. Tony loves him for it. It's no wonder Steve's latched on to him so quickly - the guy's practically radiating pragmatism.

Natasha is done making her call and they join her as they make their way back down to the main level, filling Steve in on the Cosmic Cube and its potential. There's no spark of hope in Steve's eyes and Tony can't help but be selfishly glad. He doesn't think he can handle seeing Steve shot down again by bad news should this not turn out to be a magic cure.

Barton seems to have calmed down a bit since Tony left, but he's back up in his perch, watching silently, removed from the situation. Tony doesn't miss the rifle he's got tucked up in the alcove with him - one loaded with tranqs, he suspects, knowing that it belongs to Natasha. Guns aren't really Barton's thing, but at least Steve won't have to resort to violence if Barnes snaps again. Natasha shoots him a worried glance but doesn't say anything while Steve gently sits Barnes down on the couch.

“Hey,” he greets Thor, “thanks for coming.”

“No thanks are necessary,” Thor smiles, moving to stand beside them.

They all seem to be holding their collective breaths, though none more so than Tony and Clint, who have seen what happens when Barnes feels threatened. They need not worry it seems.

Thor crouches down in front of Barnes, going to his knees with a slow, gentle grace that is almost soothing to watch. From there, he looks up with kind eyes and smiles reassuringly. “I am no threat to you,” he swears, “and you will come to no harm at my hands.”

It’s easy to forget that Thor is more like Steve than any of them. Incredibly powerful physically, but possessing a heart of solid gold.

Barnes continues to stare directly ahead, neither frightened by Thor’s presence or acknowledging it at all. He’s locked firmly in there and the tragedy of it is that this time it’s of his own desire. This world and its realities are too much for Bucky to cope with and to protect himself he’s retreated so far back into the motionless, emotionless creature HYDRA made him into that the progresses Barnes has made over the last few weeks are nowhere to be found.

Steve is still hovering fretfully behind Barnes’ shoulder, but Tony can’t bring himself to make any pointed observations like he had done before. He knows in his heart he could never have done to Pepper what Steve had been forced to do to Barnes. He knows that, in the long run, it will be Steve who carries the heavier burden of that. For Barnes, the moment will no doubt sink into a pit of other painful memories, but for Steve there can be no escaping the fact that the only way to save his friend from hurting himself was to choke him unconscious.

Thor seems to understand that his apprehension for Barnes is no reflection of Steve’s judgement of him personally and makes no further comment as he curls one hand over Barnes’ head and places the other palm against his forehead. Whatever he’s looking for, whatever power he has to read the hearts and minds of men, he stays that way for several long minutes before eventually pulling back.

“What?” Steve prompts, a tinge of desperation to his voice.

“I am no healer,” Thor shakes his head, “but wounds like these require proper care. I fear that using the cube would only further his hurt.”

“But he’d remember?” Steve questions softly.

“The Cube has the power to grant any wish,” Thor agrees reluctantly, “but the potential for harm could prove catastrophic. These are hurts of the soul as much as the mind, and that is a tricky thing to work with, believe me.”

“So we’re back to square one?” Bruce asks, folding his arms over his chest.

“I did not say that,” Thor shakes his head, “his spirit is strong. He is stubborn.” He looks up at Steve and smiles kindly. “He cannot make this journey alone, but I do not believe it is outside the realms of possibility that he may do so with your help.”

“Stubborn.” Steve’s laugh is almost like a sob. “Yeah, he’s stubborn alright.” He swallows down a fresh wave of pain and nods gratefully at Thor. “Thank you. For coming.” He says it again, but it’s clear how grateful he is, and not just to Thor, but all of them.

“We are allies.” Thor says, rising to his feet. “And we are friends. You would do the same for me if I had the need.” Things really are that simple in Thor’s mind. Tony rather loves him for it.

“Can you stay?” Natasha asks him from her spot on the couch. She’s directly below Barton and is fiddling absently with her slim silver necklace. “We could use the extra hands.”

“The Nine Realms are at peace.” Thor nods. “My presence can be spared. I was intending to spend more time in your world as it is.” He’s talking about Jane, Tony realizes, a small smile blooming on his face. She’s head over heels for him, and Thor is genuinely besotted with her - he’s glad they are going to get the chance to spend more time together.

“Great.” Natasha nods, pleased. “Then I guess now’s a good a time as any to tell you that I’ve found Aleksander Lukin.”

Steve’s head shots up. “Where?” He demands, the need for violence bright in his eyes.

“Kensington.”

“London?” Thor asks, looking rather pleased that he knows. Natasha nods with a shadow of an indulgent smile.

They all look at Steve, who has let out a short bark of bitter laughter. “We always did say we’d go back after the war.” He says, absently brushing an escaping strand of Barnes’ hair back behind his ear. “Tony?”

Tony grins, immensely relieved that they can finally *do* something, “JARVIS, fire up the jet. Let Miss Potts know I’ll be out of reach for a few days.” He surveys the room, taking stock of everyone’s determined faces. “Official Avengers business.”

Chapter End Notes

AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!

Heee, it's only taken 45k.

This one isn't half as sad as the last one, but if you need them I have kitten and rainbows on my tumblr.

www.boopboopbi.tumblr.com

x

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Titheniel continues to work her editorial magic and deserves many enthusiastic hugs.
Mwah. x

“Are we sure this is a good idea?” Bruce asks, his eyes darting around the inside of the jet. Natasha’s in the cockpit with Barton, hopefully calming him down. Tony will give her a few hours alone with him then go in and try make his own apologies. Barton’s rage burns hot and fast, and he’s usually quick to forgive little slights and insults, but Loki’s a different matter.

“It’s better than a quinjet.” Tony shrugs, helping himself to a vodka tonic that he hopes will settle his nerves.

Bruce gives him a particularly unimpressed frown. “That’s not what I mean.”

“No,” Tony sighs, “I know what you mean.” He means them, all of them, in the small, confined space that is Tony’s private jet. He means Thor, who seems mildly fascinated with the reclining chairs, and Barnes, who has that thousand yard stare fixed on the wall in front of him. He means himself, really, because he never travels well on planes. “Steve’s right though. Splitting up is a bad idea.”

They’d had that argument shortly after making the decision to take the fight to Lukin instead of waiting on him making the next move. Bruce had been the one to point out that Barnes was safest staying in the tower with Steve, but Steve, in a moment of uncharacteristic uncertainty, had not wanted them to separate. They are stronger as a team, and that’s very true, but Tony’s a little uneasy with the idea of bringing Barnes out of the safety of the tower. He thinks Steve’s made the wrong call here, but for once he doesn’t have the balls to call him on it. Not when Tony already keeping so many secrets from him.

“And bringing him with us is a better one?” Bruce says very quietly, his gaze darting over to Barnes. “He was safer back there and you know it as well as I do, so what gives? You’ve never had a problem calling people up when you think they’re wrong. What’s changed?”

Tony hesitates, not making eye contact. “He’s having a real rough time of it, that’s all.” He says in a way that isn’t an answer at all.

Bruce’s gaze softens compassionately. “Of course he is,” he says, “but that’s even more reason to call him on these things. His head isn’t in the game right now. He’s going to make some bad choices if he’s not careful.”

“Cap, make bad choices?” Tony scoffs, but it is weak. Steve’s head *is* so far out of the game that it isn’t even a little funny.

“You should try get some rest.” They hear Steve say to Barnes from across the jet. They turn to glance where Steve’s gently pressing Barnes onto the couch, easing him down. Barnes obeys but it’s clear from the tight lines around his eyes and the trembling in his hands that he’s frightened again, even with Steve trying his best to be soothing. It’s the nightmares, Tony thinks. Bucky’s

retreated back into himself to avoid having to deal with the pain and confusion in his head, but there's no escape from them if he sleeps.

But he needs it, he desperately needs it. He doubts very much Barnes slept while he was on the run, and he's managed only a half dozen hours over the few days he's been with them. He desperately needs sleep, because Tony can see the circles under his eyes growing every hour, and the curve of his cheekbones sharpening with them. He's wasting away in his torment.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?" Thor proposes, standing from his seat and moving to join Steve and Barnes on the other side of the jet. "There is a gift in my family for healing trances. I cannot promise how long it will last for you, or how deeply you will sleep, but you have my word you will suffer no ill dreams."

"That sounds good, doesn't it?" Steve says, smiling down at Barnes who has wide eyes fixed on Thor's kind expression.

"My mother was particularly talented in this skill." Thor is smiling but there is an edge of sadness to it. Of course. He lost his mother only days before he lost his brother. He's another miracle. Endure and continue, that seems to be the one thing they all have in common. "My brother was a more able student than I, but I am not without talent." He hesitates for a moment. "You must tell me you wish for it." Thor says, still kind but with an edge of seriousness that is surprising. "I will not take your silence for consent."

Tony and Bruce watch curiously, hopefully, as Barnes gives the slightest of nods and the tension drains out of Steve's shoulders.

Barnes is still tense as Thor presses his hand gently over his eyes, but it lasts only seconds before his body loosens and he relaxes bonelessly into the couch.

"Two barrels." Tony mutters under his breath as Barnes' breathing evens out gently. Bruce just raises his eyebrow. He knows better than to ask.

"Thank you." Steve says quietly, clasping his hand with Thor as the two of them move a few paces away from Barnes' sleeping form. "For everything."

"You are both in pain." Thor says kindly. "I would ease your burden also, should you allow it."

Steve smiles gratefully but he shakes his head. "No, thank you. This is...this is enough." He doesn't say that he takes comfort from seeing Barnes at peace, but it's clear as day from his expression alone.

"Then I will leave you to your thoughts. I have been invited to learn the art of poker by your friend Sam." Tony can spot Sam at the very back of the plane, absently shuffling a pack of cards. Steve glances back and then suddenly grins.

"I thought Darcy taught you?" He says very quietly, as to not be overheard by Sam.

"I did not wish to disappoint him." Thor shrugs with a lopsided grin.

"You're gonna hustle him, you mean." Steve shakes his head. He looks so much younger when he smiles. He is young, Tony thinks sadly. Ice cube time aside, Steve's not yet thirty.

"Do not impugn my honor!" Thor says with a rumbling laugh.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Steve says wryly. "Have fun."

Thor claps him on the shoulder and moves to join Sam, who lights up in excitement as he's joined. Bruce shakes his head and laughs before leaning back in his seat and slipping a set of headphones over his ears. He claims listening to music helps him not freak out about the fact that he's locked in a flying tin can and while Tony's not going to knock anything that keeps him from turning green, he's not so sure Johnny Cash would have been his first choice in chill-out tunes. Apparently there's something about the pitch of his voice that does it for Bruce. "You guys are ridiculous." He says fondly, closing his eyes as he prepares to nap.

"That's why you love us." Tony smirks, rising from his seat and leaving Bruce to his rest. "So I gotta ask...and you can tell me to mind my own business-" Tony starts as he approaches Steve.

Steve raises an eyebrow curiously, "Last time I heard those words Nat asked me how many people I'd kissed since 1945," he says wryly.

"The two subjects are related." Tony says with a tired grin. He takes a seat opposite Steve and glances over to Barnes, who, finally, is resting peacefully. "Like I said, you don't have to tell me anything. I'll actually back off on this one-"

"Spit it out, Tony." Steve sighs.

Tony rubs the back of his neck. He has no idea why he feels so awkward asking, only that he really feels he should. "Did you and he? Back in the day...you know..." he suddenly has a flash of inspiration, "did you two... fondue?"

Steve's expression is hilariously outraged. "Fucking Howard." Steve mumbles, making Tony choke on spit as he doubles over laughing.

"You said fuck." He giggles, like it's the funniest thing in the world. It's not, not even slightly, but the emotions inside him are so pent up that they find a release either way. Laughter is better than tears, he supposes.

"I was in the Army, Stark." Steve sighs, rubbing his forehead wearily. "And we were at war. I can say 'fuck' in fourteen different languages."

"Way to burst that world view." Tony says, forcing himself to stop laughing. It's hard, almost impossible, at least until he takes another look at Steve's tired, pinched expression. Then sobriety comes easy. "So? Did you?"

"That obvious, huh?" Steve's smile is agonizingly pained.

"That you're in love with him?" Tony asks, "Little bit. You kinda wear your heart on your sleeve. I'm guessing you never told him." He can tell as much from the way Steve glances over at Barnes' sleeping form. There's as much longing there as there is affection. "And he never told you?"

Steve laughs silently. "I never saw it. Bucky, he...I've known I loved him since I was twelve years old."

"And you never told him?" Tony asks, both exasperated and sad. He gets the feeling that Steve actually needs to talk about this, about Bucky, to someone. He's as good a bet as any.

"The guys, they constantly bugged me to talk to him about it. About a lot of things, actually," Steve sighs, "Monty would pull me aside at least once a week. 'Pull your head out of your arse, Steven', he'd say." His imitation of a British accent is scarily on the ball.

"That's pretty progressive for the '40s." Tony says.

“Not really.” Steve shrugs thoughtlessly. “Homophobia was different back then. More things just didn’t get talked about.”

“Except by your merry little troop of degenerates?” Tony prompts. “Who I am now imagining in a very ‘Men in Tights’ kinda way.” Steve snorts and rolls his eyes. So he’s seen that one at least. Good.

“We were family.” Steve says, as if that says everything. Maybe it does when it’s a family of your choosing. “And with Bucky they were...” he breaks off and sighs, his eyes flicking back to Barnes’ sleeping form. “They had a different kind of bond with him than they did with me. He’d been in the trenches with them, he’d been a captive with them, hell, the only reason he ended up on Zola’s bench in the first place was because he took a beating to cover an escape attempt and couldn’t work in the factory any longer.” Tony’s not heard that story before, and he likes these little glimpses into the person Bucky was back then. “The others, they were loyal to me, but they loved Bucky. None of us coped well after he fell.”

“Tell me about it?” Tony pushes with a whisper. He knows for a fact that this is something Steve has never shared with anyone. He’d ended up under the ice himself not long after, and when he woke up James Barnes had been considered dead for so long that Tony doubts anyone thought to counsel Steve’s grief for him. “If you want.” He has to add that, because the shadows in Steve’s eyes are suddenly so deep and so dark that Tony genuinely wonders how he functions day to day.

“You read the report?” Steve asks, swallowing. Tony nods. He did. He knows that day changed everything, and not just for Steve and his men. The Allies had come to see Captain America and the Howling Commandos as invincible. Tony imagines a part of them did as well. Ironically it was his dad who put it the most succinctly: a part of Steve never got off that train.

“I read it.”

“You know it doesn’t mention how brave he was.”

“I think that was sorta implied with the whole zip lining onto a speeding train thing.” Tony says sympathetically but Steve’s already shaking his head.

“No, not that. Well sure, that, but we’d done crazy stuff like that for years by that point. I mean going after Zola.” Steve shakes his head sadly. “We had to do it. We had to bring him in, but Zola had already tortured him twice and I know he was afraid of what could happen.”

“Twice?” Tony knows about the factory in Krossberg and the encounter between Barnes and Zola that had started all this, but he can’t recall hearing about a second time.

“Bavaria.” Steve nods absently. “We were separated. I don’t think HYDRA really knew who he was at the time, but he was my second in command, so they brought him to Zola for interrogation.” Tony cringes. It sounds like Barnes had shitty luck even before all this happened. “I got to him after a couple of hours, but it was pretty bad. He didn’t speak to any of us for a week. I told him, I said when we were planning the mission that he didn’t have to come. That we’d manage without him if we had to.”

Tony shakes his head sadly. Goddamn but Steve’s oblivious sometimes. “How many times did he hit you for that?” He asks.

“Just the once.” Steve says with a rueful smile. “Bust three knuckles in the process. God, he was mad.”

“Can you blame him?” Tony asks gently. Personally he’d have punched Steve a couple of times. Okay, he’d have been wearing the suit while he did it, but. Details, really.

“No,” Steve says softly. “I could never protect him when we were kids. He was always getting hurt because of me. And then when I could he wouldn’t let me.” His eyes become haunted. “And when he needed me the most, I was useless.”

“Steve.” Tony tries to stop him from going down that path again but it’s obvious he’s far too late for that.

“Don’t tell me this isn’t my fault.” Steve says, his jaw tight and tears bright in his eyes. “I should have looked harder, I should never have given up on him. I should never have let him fall in the first place.” He’s crying again, softly, silently, but he’s wholly unashamed of the tears on his cheeks.

“Don’t do this to yourself, buddy.” Tony begs him. “Would he want you to? Your Bucky, the man you knew, would he sit here and listen to you talk like this? Or would he slap your sorry ass upside the head?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Steve snarls, angry tears splashing down his face. “He *can’t*. He doesn’t remember any of this, so why does it matter?”

“Not true.” The soft voice besides them makes both Tony and Steve jump. “I remember your voice.”

“Bucky?” Steve swallows, sliding off the chair to kneel besides the couch. “Hey.”

Bucky - and it is Bucky, Tony notes - blinks tiredly, the effects of the sleep Thor put him into still cling to him and it seems to take the edge off his terror, leaving him in an almost trancelike state. “Steve.” He breathes, leaning into the palm that cups his cheek. “You’re here.”

“I’m here,” Steve agrees, stroking back his hair with his other hand. “I’m going to take care of you, I promise.”

“I knew you’d find me.” Bucky breathes softly, still struggling to keep his eyes open. Steve chokes back a sob.

“I’ll always find you.” He promises. “I missed you.”

“Hmm.” Bucky says, his eyes falling closed again and remaining that way as his breathing evens out. It’s the most peaceful and at rest they have seen him and for that alone Tony’s got plans to buy Thor the biggest barrel of ale he can get his hands on once they land. Make that two. Hell, twelve, if they can fit them all in the jet.

Steve settles back in his seat but keeps his hand outstretched and resting in Bucky’s dark hair.

Tony stays quiet and rises, giving them some of the privacy that they are sorely denied.

He makes his way to the cockpit where Natasha and Clint are sat in companionable silence. “Hey,” he greets them. “How we doing?”

“Just passing Ireland.” Natasha says, flashing him a small smile as he slides into the seat beside her. “Should be landing in an hour.”

“Good.” Tony nods. “Safe house ready to go?”

“There’s a van waiting for us at the airstrip.” Clint adds.

“And it’s actually *safe*?” Tony can’t help but be paranoid. One too many bad experiences with trusting other people.

“My source is as straight laced as they come.” Natasha promises. “As far as the official documents are concerned, we’re flying in one of your board members for a meeting in the City.”

“Good.” Tony says, “that’s good why is that light flashing?” He points in alarm at the control panel which has suddenly gone haywire with alerts. “JARVIS?”

“Our on board sensors are picking up an incoming missile, but my scanners can find no hostiles in range, nor do they pick up a point of origin. Suggest possible-“

JARVIS doesn’t get to finish the report. Natasha suddenly jerks the jet into a spiral to avoid the missile that comes flying past the nose of the jet. Tony, who isn’t wearing a seatbelt, hits the side of the panel hard and it knocks the wind out of him. He instinctively summons the suit, but before he has the chance to do little more than brace himself, a second missile takes out their port side engine, sending a shockwave through the whole plane. He doesn’t have time to be afraid.

This time when Tony is thrown forward, he hits the windshield head first, and unconsciousness follows instantly.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Much love as ever to my splendiferous beta, but also to you guys, who have yet to kill me for being so mean (even if I suspect some of you kinda want to...)!

Tony comes to at the best - or worst - possible moment. He's in the suit, alarms blaring loudly in both ears. He can't actually focus on what is in front of him for the blood in his eyes but he knows he's flat on his back, staring up at a blue sky that's marred with the remains of smoke and flame.

They blew up his plane. They blew up his plane while they were still in the fucking air.

His first thought is: *rude*.

His second is full of terror.

He's wearing the suit, which means at some point between losing consciousness and hitting the ground, his sorry ass has once again been saved by instincts and his ability to engineer WOMDs out of freaking paper cups. He remembers calling the suit before losing consciousness, but not being encased by its protective shield. That's something he has noted with the new models - with the new, external power source - the shell feels like something external now, like a favorite jacket instead of an accessory that's powered by his own heartbeat. It's a little more alien and a little more comfortable, all at the same time.

He's got a stack of notes in his head that he needs to address sooner rather than later, he just needs the time to do so. Until then, he can be nothing but relieved that he can still feel his fingers and his toes, that his head might be still ringing and throbbing, but is at least still attached to his shoulders.

But can the same be said for the rest of them?

Nothing can kill Bruce, but it's not actually that Tony worries about. He knows how this one unfolds - either the blast caught him off guard and he Hulked out on impact, or he saw it coming and triggered the transition himself. Either way, he'll have survived the fall.

He's fairly sure Thor would be alright, what with the power of flight at his fingertips. Tony will even go out on a limb and hope that Sam, who was sitting so close to him as he wondered how he was losing yet another hand at poker, would be safe with their resident demigod. Thor has a protective streak a mile wide and if Sam survived the blast... *if* he survived the blast. Please, let him have survived it. Tony doesn't make friends well, and certainly not fast, and he's known Sam for barely a heartbeat -- but he's Steve's friend, so that makes him Tony's friend by proxy. He's a part of the team, their team...

Just like Bucky is now. Tony has no idea if even someone with the ramped up healing abilities Barnes and Steve have could have survived either the explosion or the fall. They were in the middle of the jet, right where the missile hit, and that's before you factor in the descent to earth. They are both tough, hardy bastards, but can they really survive something so extreme? He has to hope so. He won't, he *can't* allow himself to think otherwise.

And what about Natasha and Clint? They're human. They have no serum to enhance their endurance and healing, no magic powers and no chance. No chance at all. They must be...

But they're not. As Tony grunts and rolls onto his side, the mask of his suit falling to the ground with a hiss, he spots flaming red hair beside him. He has a brief, painful flash Clint throwing himself around Natasha as they tumble through the air, of him tucking her into his body, and of Tony's own arm reaching for them, practically numb with fear.

He caught them. He caught them and he broke their fall. He's been proud of a lot of things in his life, almost as many as he's been ashamed about - this, knowing that he saved them, that he thought first and foremost of their own safety...it's possibly the first time he's felt worthy of their trust in him.

Natasha is even conscious, though she looks like she took more of the brunt of their impact than Tony would have liked. She hugs her arm to her chest as blood trickles down her cheek. It's the first time Tony's ever looked at her and realized how small she is. How young. But there are tears in her eyes and she looks scared, so, so scared.

The reason is quickly apparent.

Clint is not conscious. He doesn't even look alive. For a terrifying second Tony thinks he might be dead, and that he failed them after all, but when he drags himself closer he can see the faint rise and fall of Barton's chest.

"Is he?" Natasha hasn't been able to move close enough to inspect for herself. Tony doesn't know if that is because she is too badly hurt or because she's too afraid of the answer.

"He's alive." Tony promises her, horrified when tears start rolling down her cheeks. He'd never thought he'd see her cry. Hell, a cold, cruel part of him had wondered if she even could.

He regrets ever thinking that as she crawls forwards on her knees, dragging herself with her uninjured arm until she's curled around Clint's shoulders and radiating a mix of terrifying violence and heartbreaking fear. She pets his hair gently, as if she's scared even the slightest amount of pressure will cause irreparable damage.

Tony's known that there has been something between the two of them for as long as he's known them. He's always assumed it was understanding, companionship, love for sure, but one with a distance that seemed almost mandatory for people who did what they did day in, day out.

It's not. Natasha is looking at Clint now the way Steve looks at Bucky; the way Tony knows he looks at Pepper. He wonders if she's about to break.

Then she pushes herself to her feet and stumbles across the muddy ground to a large puddle. "I need grass." She tells him.

Tony stares at her, slightly nonplussed. "I'm assuming that's not a euphemism for weed..." He breaks off under her withering glare.

"He's bleeding out too quickly. We need to seal the wound and stabilize his neck." She grimaces as she uses both hands, injured arm be damned, to scoop up a large amount of thick, clay-like mud. Tony does as he's told, wishing not for the first time since he's had this new change in lifestyle that he paid more attention to the survival tips Jimmy Dugan had always been telling him as a kid.

Passing her the thick wads of grass, he watches and wrinkles his nose as she mixes it with the mud, creating a sticky, seriously unhygienic looking poultice. "That cannot be sanitary."

“It’s not,” she says, packing the mixture over the gushing wound on Clint’s skull. “But the blood loss will kill him before infection gets the chance if we don’t slow it down. Help me take my shirt off.”

Tony stares at her. “I-”

“We need to stabilize his neck.” She says. It’s remarkable how far removed she seems from the woman she was only minutes ago. She’s calm now, focused solely on the man beside her. Her resolve helps steady Tony’s nerve and he does as she asks once more, grimacing when he sees the extent of the bruising that’s not hidden by her bloody tank top. There’s no way that arm of hers isn’t broken, but she doesn’t let him shift focus away from Clint. “Help me get this under his neck.” She says, passing Tony her shirt.

He looks between it and Clint in growing horror. “I thought you weren’t supposed to move people with neck injuries!” He yelps. He fucks this up, he either kills Barton or he paralyzes him.

“That’s why I need you to do it.” She says, fixing him with a confident expression that is only betrayed by the fear in her eyes. “We have to stabilize him. If he wakes up and tries to move we have to limit the damage he can do to himself. I need you to do this, Tony.”

It’s the need that gets him. Natasha never admits to needing anything, but now Tony’s sliding his hand under the curve of Barton’s skull and steadying the other on his shoulder, doing everything he can to make sure Clint’s neck doesn’t twist or move as she tugs her shirt around it and fashions it into a brace.

“The things you learn in the KGB.” Tony marvels as she lets him settle Clint back the half inch he’s been lifted off the ground. “You’re a goddamn miracle, Romanov.” Tony shakes his head in wonder - quickly regretting it when his vision blurs. He feels this bad and he’s protected by a metal suit. He can’t bear to think how badly the both of them are hurting right now. Clint is their priority, but he doesn’t trust for a second that Natasha isn’t more injured than she seems.

She spares him a small, shaky smile, and he can’t help reach out and touch her cheek, where blood and split skin mar her face. She doesn’t flinch back, even as fresh tears well up in her eyes, and he knows right there and then that Natasha Romanov is going to hold a spot in his heart, and he in hers, until the day they die.

Which is possibly today.

“JARVIS, buddy, you there?” Tony asks, getting to business.

“In a manner of speaking, sir.” JARVIS responds. “Not all of my sensors are currently online, but I can tell you were in Kilough, Northern Ireland.”

“Great.” Tony mutters. He can smell the salt of the sea and supposes it’s only luck that brought them down while they were still over land and not in the middle of the Irish Sea.

But it’s not luck. It’s design. They were shot down by someone who wanted them out of the air and disadvantaged. His first thought is HYDRA, but unless they know something about Barnes’ physiology that Tony doesn’t - and it’s possible, he hasn’t spent seventy years dissecting the man - then it goes against everything they’ve set out to achieve to risk potentially killing Barnes in the crash. So sure, it might be HYDRA. It also might be one of any number of people who want Barnes, and the Avengers for that matter, dead.

“The others?” Tony asks, his heart in his throat.

"I am picking up multiple life signals in the vicinity but am currently unable to distinguish between them, forgive me."

The suit has taken too much damage in explosion and resulting crash. There are still alarms flaring in his ear and he can feel the lack of power at his fingertips. He feels fragile in the suit, something that only ever happens when they've taken a beating together and Tony's willpower is the only thing keeping it moving.

"Go." Natasha tells him, drawing a gun from beneath Clint's jacket Tony hesitates. She's good, she's amazing really, but she's badly injured and protecting an unconscious man who cannot be moved. He's under no illusions what will happen if whoever shot them down gets to her before Tony returns. "Go!" She demands, glaring at him. Her tears have stopped and she's once more focused on the task at hand. It's hard to not want to follow in her example, and it's something she and Steve have in common. He doubts she knows that and swears to tell her when they are all safely home and together again. "Find them."

"Stay alive." He tells her, resting his hand briefly on Clint's shoulder and trying to stamp down on the worry that grows when he starts thinking about how Barton should really have started to regain consciousness by now.

"Just...come back." She says the words in an offhand way, but Tony can read what's between the lines. She's never had a safety net before them, she's never had someone to trust with both her and Clint's lives, and now it seems she's started to get used to it. And she can't deal with the idea that it might have already been taken from her.

"I'll bring souvenirs." Tony says with a smile designed at making her roll her eyes. She does and he considers that one tick in the boxes stacked up against all the shit he's done over the years.

He stumbles to his feet and has JARVIS lead him towards the closest life signs. He knows his AI is seriously malfunctioning when he stumbles into a field of cows.

He's about to start panicking when he spots Barnes' crouched form and the still, unmoving figure below him. That's when Tony panics for real, sprinting forward only to skid to a stop as Barnes pivots on his heel and grabs Tony hard around the throat with his metal fingers. The suit protects him, but Tony gets the feeling that if Barnes were to really try, he could crumple the alloy like a sheet of paper, and Tony's neck with it.

"Hey, hey!" Tony yells, glad he's already dumped the mask and holding up his hands in what he really hopes is a 'do not kill me' kind of way. "It's me!"

He has no idea who he is dealing with - it he's got Barnes or Bucky or even the Winter Soldier on his hands, and in truth he's not all that sure which one of them would be easier to handle at this point. His face is covered with blood and most of it seems to be coming from a large open wound on his hairline. Steve's shield lies close by, bloody and charred, but no doubt the reason they both survived the impact.

Tony watches cautiously as he turns back to Steve, who is bleeding out far too fast and freely. Unlike Barton, who seemed to have taken most of the impact to the skull, Steve's battered from head to toe and bleeding furiously, though Tony's having a hard time establishing a point of origin beneath Steve's blood soaked sweater. Now that the grip on his neck has gone, Tony can drop to his knees besides him and hastily scan him over. "Come on buddy," Tony pleads, giving his arm a little shake. "I am not ready to deliver your eulogy." Steve groans in pain and his eyes slowly open. "Oh thank God," Tony breathes, "Don't do that again. Ever."

“Bucky?” Steve moans, clearly having trouble focusing but Barnes is hovering directly over him, so Steve’s eyes fix on his face. “You’re bleeding.”

“I am operational.” Tony’s blood runs cold, almost as cold as that voice. This is not Barnes and it’s not Bucky either. This is the Winter Soldier. This is violence and ice, tightly coiled and ready to be sprung on his next target.

“Others?” Steve groans brokenly, rolling on to his side and trying to push himself up on to his feet. That’s when Tony sees the shard of metal, too large to be shrapnel, embedded in Steve’s side. It’s about the length of Tony’s forearm and several inches wide.

It’s not the kind of wound anyone, not even Steve, comes back from easy.

“Holy hell, you should not be moving!” He yelps, reaching out a hand to steady Steve when he falls back to his knees. He goes down hard, but is braced by a strong metal arm that curls around his chest.

It’s still not Bucky behind the wheel, or Barnes, who has shown concern for Steve’s wellbeing on multiple occasions, but the Winter Soldier has clearly decided that Steve is someone he needs to protect.

“Can you...it out?” Steve’s struggling to string a sentence together and that terrifies Tony. He can’t answer. Natasha is more qualified to deal with this kind of thing than he is. Steve is. Hell, Bucky is. Tony’s an engineer. He fixes machines, not people.

“If we remove the shrapnel you will bleed to death in six minutes.” The Winter Soldier informs him in a flat, dead voice. “The point of impact suggests it has compromised your liver and the color of your blood suggests low levels of oxygenation.” Tony isn’t one hundred percent sure he wants to dwell on that - it’s true though. The blood at Steve’s throat and mouth is red and bold, but the blood located around the metal shard is almost black.

The Winter Soldier sets Steve down with a shocking amount of gentleness, mindful of the worst of his injury, before his head snaps up and his eyes narrow, alert and on guard.

Tony knows how keen his hearing is. “How many?” He asks, knowing that it was only going to be a matter of time before the people who shot them down come to collect any bounty that survived.

“Seven vehicles.” The Soldier says. “Two FV510s, one FV513, three FV721s and an FV104.” Tony stares at him. They’re about to face a small army of tanks. And an ambulance. It’s not a really encouraging prospect.

“Great.” Tony mutters.

“Can you get us out of here?” Steve asks, gritting his teeth against a wave of pain. He’s pale and clammy and his skin looks almost gray.

“Yes.” Tony says. He’s run the calculations. He’s barely got enough power to get himself out of dodge, let alone a passenger... or two in this case. But he forces the determination out anyway.

Steve reads right through it. “Tony?”

For all his brilliance, his creations, his goddamn Hail Mary plans, Tony feels like the world’s biggest fraud when he meets Steve’s gaze and admits, “I’m running on two percent battery here. The blast, or the fall, or hey, both, did a real number on the reactor and the repulsors are not engaging. It’s leaking and I can’t stop it and I--”

“Then take him,” Steve says, cutting off Tony’s guilt infused rant and directing his gaze to the silent figure beside them. “Take him and get as far away from here as you can.” The effort he puts into that single sentence is astonishing, but it’s reflected in the resolute calm in his face.

“I am not leaving you behind.” Tony snarls even as he knows that he will if he has to. They’ve come to an understanding, him and Steve, one backed by a weight Steve can’t yet appreciate. Bucky, Barnes... whichever personality is inhabiting his body be damned, Tony is as responsible for keeping him out of enemy hands as he is helping him heal from the torture Tony’s own father helped inflict on him.

“I can’t...I’m not going anywhere.” Steve admits softly. He knows he’s in a bad way. He knows that between the three of them, the state they are in, it would be up to the Winter Soldier to do most of the heavy lifting, and he’s still an entity they can’t be certain of.

Steve’ll die before he lets Bucky fall back into HYDRA’s hands, and right now he’s asking Tony to help make that happen.

“Please,” Steve says, his gaze earnest and desperate and so full of fear Tony knows he can’t deny him. “Tony, please.”

Tony can’t answer, not without his voice breaking, not without revealing how much this stupidly kind, inspiring, infuriating, do-gooding asshole has come to mean to him. He nods shortly, and he wraps an arm around the Winter Soldier, who jerks in surprise at the contact.

And like a bright burst of light, it’s suddenly Bucky Tony is struggling to keep a hold of. Bucky, who is looking down at Steve with horror blooming on his face. “Steve!”

Steve sees, hears, and he smiles, like hearing Bucky’s voice and seeing him behind his eyes is the only thing he’s ever wanted - like it’s the last desire of his heart, and one he’ll take to the grave smiling. “Get out of here, Buck!” He says, using his shield to leverage himself up on to his feet. Captain America will go out standing, there is no other way for him. Steve doesn’t know how to just lay down and accept his fate.

Tony knows he’s never going to be the guy who lays on the wire and lets others crawl over him, that’s not his style, it’s not in his nature. He cuts the wire. He subverts the problem. If door A and door B are closed to him, he blasts down the wall and makes himself a door C.

Only now he’s out of tricks. There are no other options, no last minute save. There’s nothing to cut the wire with, nothing to defuse the grenade.

So Steve does what he’ll always do. He lays down over it, he absorbs the explosion and he lets them crawl over him to safety.

Tony watches him haul himself up on his shield and stand, bleeding to death in front of them, surefooted and strong between danger and his friends.

And he gets it, maybe for the very first time. He gets why Captain America inspires the world. He gets why people want to be a better person just because Steve is in their lives.

He gets why Bucky went back into the line of fire, over and over again.

The looming dark shapes of the approaching vehicles are clearer now. The ground shakes with their number and it’s only a matter of moments before they will be close enough for Tony to see through the windshields to see the faces of the men behind the wheel. They have to go. They have to.

“Get out of here!” Steve calls back, an edge of desperation in his voice.

“No!” Bucky screams, wrenching free of Tony’s grip and tearing towards Steve, “Not without you!”

Tony knows he has absolutely no hope of containing someone of Bucky’s strength when his suit is this depleted, but that doesn’t mean he’s out of options. He charges forwards and locks his hand around Bucky’s metal wrist. Within seconds they are magnetized. You’d need a hell of a lot more upper body strength than even Bucky has to break their connection.

Bucky seems to understand what is happening a split second before it does. Tony’s not sure which is more painful: the devastated fear in his eyes or the relief in Steve’s.

The vehicles are only feet away now. Tony can’t wait any longer.

He puts everything into the thrusters and they blast off from the ground. They haven’t taken flight and it’s more like they are following the projection of a rocket than anything else, but it is fast and it gets them out of dodge in an instant, leaving Steve and his iconic shield merely a speck of color surrounded by a sea of black and gray.

Tony knows they are going to crash land. He’s used all the suit’s remaining power just to get them off the ground.

They’ll crash, and he tries to protect Bucky as much as he can, but he knows it’s going to hurt when they land. Tony almost looks forward to it. It stops him dwelling on the fact that he’s just left his friend to an almost certain death, that Natasha is defenseless and Clint badly injured, that Thor, Bruce and Sam are missing in action.

It stops him questioning whether this is the right thing to do.

It is, he knows that.

Only the right things ever hurt this much.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I'm genuinely overwhelmed by the response to the last chapter! You are so utterly wonderful, thank you! I'm trying my best to catch up on comments but I think by this point I'm ten chapters behind. I'll get there, but if you receive a response from me that doesn't make any sense it's probably because I am overwhelmed and flailing at you like the moron I am. In all cases it can be translated to 'thank you,' and 'you're awesome!'

P.S. My beta is pretty much the reason half of the horrible emotional stuff is as horrible and emotional as it is, so please direct all threats of violence and death in [her direction](#) :P

And look! I figured how to link to [tumblr!](#) I'm learning! :D

When Tony comes to, he's not breathing. He is trying to, but there's a pressure around his throat making it all but impossible to suck in more than the slightest breath.

He wonders, panicked, if he's broken his neck when they hit the ground. He'd been trying to protect Barnes from the impact, but their combined weight on impact had knocked him out cold.

He's scared to move, but the screaming from above him is loud and frightened, it's angry, and Tony knows it's aimed at him. He opens his eyes, deathly afraid of what he'll see.

His difficulty breathing is quickly made apparent.

Barnes is straddling his chest and has both hands wrapped around Tony's neck.

This...isn't all that unexpected.

He waits for Barnes to start throwing accusations at him, and maybe in a way he does, but the only word that comes out of his mouth is "*Steve!*" Knowing now how much of Barnes' life has been defined by Steve, he can't help but wonder if maybe, after HYDRA stripped him of his memories and his personality, that Steve's name was the only thing he has been able to retain.

His only saving grace as Barnes slowly strangles the life out of him is his suit. That, and the fact that the second fall has clearly done something to damage the circuitry in Barnes' metal arm. Those fingers spasm wildly and seem to be functioning at less than their usual strength. They make dents in the metal around Tony's throat, making it harder than ever to breathe, but saving him from what would, under Barnes' full strength, be an already broken neck.

He continues to scream Steve's name in a broken, sobbing voice, alternatively shaking and choking Tony, who can do little more than to grasp at his hands ineffectively. There's no power left in the suit at all, so at this point it is little more than fancy body armor.

"Bu-" Tony tries to choke out his name and fails, but it does seem to flick a switch in his head.

He stops screaming Steve's name and starts forming sentences. It's not less confusing, because

now he's screaming, "You did this! You took him away from me! This is your fault! This is all your fault!"

It takes Tony a beat to place what he's saying because it doesn't make any sense. He took Bucky away, not Steve.

Then he realizes that Barnes, confused as he is, isn't talking to him. He's talking to Howard.

Tony's never, not once, thought that perhaps Bucky had resented Howard for his part in turning Steve into what he is now, but it makes a bitter sort of sense. Steve might have been the one to volunteer for the serum, but without Erskine and Howard he never would have been in the position where he was allowed to put himself into the situations that he did. Howard enabled Steve's position in the war, and it's only because of his contribution that Steve was able to become the target that he did.

So once again, Tony's being haunted by his father's ghost, punished for things that happened years before his own birth.

He's no hope of prying that metal arm away, but he can maybe do something about the other. That hand is just flesh and bone, he could break it even without the suit's enhanced strength. He grabs at it weakly, then hesitates.

There's nothing but pain in Barnes' expression. There's no coherency, no sanity really, just endless, agonizing pain. It's enough to drown in, and Tony almost thinks he should. If he's going to go out, then what more fitting way to go? Killed by the man his family has so royally screwed over after he's failed, once again, to do what needed to be done.

He tries again to talk, and this time manages to say, "Bucky!"

Something in Barnes snaps and he seems to realize that he's not getting anywhere with the suit and pulls back his arm to deliver what Tony knows will be a fatal blow.

There's a sharp crack in the air, then another immediately after. A second later, Barnes is slumping against Tony's chest, unconscious. There are two darts in his back, right between his shoulder blades.

Standing several feet behind, proof that Barnes' is clearly so messed up by what has just happened that his usually sharp senses are dulled by grief and terror, stand Sam and Thor. Both of them look a little worse for wear, mostly from the explosion, but they're whole, and relatively unharmed. That's when Tony notices that Sam's holding a gun extended in his hand.

It takes Tony a moment to try and catch his breath - and when he can't, when the suit is too battered and has moved from protection to contraction, Tony fumbles for the release and chokes in broken, pained gulps of oxygen as he's freed from its confinement.

As the suit removes itself, Barnes slumps to the ground beside him, out cold. Thor approaches quickly, helping Tony to his feet and keeping a large hand on his back to steady him. Sam is a bit more cautious, his gun still trained on Barnes. There's not a scratch on him, though his shirt looks a little singed around the edges.

"D - do I even wanna know why you're carrying a tranq gun?" Tony chokes out, crouching over Barnes and pulling the darts from his back. "Gonna go out on a limb here and guess that you didn't tell the Cap."

"Steve's a good man," Sam says calmly, "and I got no doubt that Bucky is too. But I've seen good

guys get lost in their own heads and kill their own family before. I don't take risks with people's safety like that."

Despite the fog of shock and fear and pain clouding his mind, Tony knows Sam might actually be the only one of them who can see the bigger picture at this point. Steve sure as hell can't, and neither can the rest of them. Tony needs to fix things and Thor is still too broken by his failure to save his brother. Natasha, Clint and Bruce...well, they need to believe Bucky can be saved more for themselves than anything else. Sam doesn't have those constraints.

"Executive decision being made: we're keeping him." Tony informs Thor, who is looking around for sight of the others, his expression growing more grave with each passing moment. Tony maneuvers Barnes onto his back and checks his pulse. It's sluggish and thready. "How long is this gonna keep him out?" They need to go back and rescue Steve. They need to go find Natasha and Clint. Now he's got Thor on sight, the odds are considerably more in their favor. They need to haul ass, and Sam needs to keep that gun trained on Barnes before they have the world's angriest human weapon out for their blood.

Sam looks at the gun and shrugs his shoulders. "There's enough in there to bring down a freaking elephant so I don't know...five minutes? Nat shot him up with those little zappy things of hers and he barely flinched." Natasha's Widow's Bites aren't lethal unless she wants them to be, but they pack one hell of a punch and usually render her victims unconscious for a good ten minutes. If Barnes is shaking off a hit like that, then only five minutes under the influence of the drug might not be far off the mark.

"That's....not very long." Tony hauls himself to his feet. He's not sure how, but since he's the one in possession of more of the facts it looks like he's calling the shots. God help them. "Right. We're keeping an eye on him. Thor, you need to hurry. We left Steve surrounded by hostiles and Barton's unconscious. This is strictly a recovery mission," he says seriously, and it is. Their priority has to be rescuing the missing members of their team and regrouping. "But if anyone gets in your way," he looks up at Thor steadily, "rip their goddamn limbs off."

"It would be my great pleasure." Thor says in a cold, steely voice, reminding them that for all his gentle nature and inherent kindness, the God of Thunder is one of the very last people you want to be angering.

Tony gives him the coordinates of both Natasha and Clint's, and Steve's last known location. He has them burned into the backs of his eyes, memorized desperately before the system in the suit failed entirely. Thor nods, then shoots up into the sky with Mjolnir in hand.

"Guess that leaves us with the heavy lifting." Sam says, slipping the gun back into his belt. "How bad you hurt?"

Now he's out of the suit, all of Tony's various bumps and bruises are out there to be seen. His t-shirt does little to hide them, or protect him from the cold, damp air. He waves the concern away. He's had worse. "How about you? How'd you survive the crash?"

"Thor and I have agreed that we're never gonna talk about it." Sam says darkly. "Man, I miss my wings."

Tony vaguely remembers reading something about that. "Ah yes, the exo-1. What happened to that?" Would have been useful. Seriously useful.

"Our buddy here clipped 'em." Sam shrugs, taking hold of Barnes' metal arm and looping it over his shoulder. "Man, these super soldiers are heavier than they look." Tony scrambles to help,

bracing Barnes' other arm until they are carrying him between them, one arm looped over each of their shoulders. He is actually lighter than he looks, especially considering the metal arm. He doesn't put it past HYDRA to have done more to him than just tamper with the prosthetic. Still, he gets why Sam makes the comments. It's made to ease the tension.

"I can take a look at 'em if you like." Tony offers. "See if we can't get you airborne again. Might make this faster in future." They head off slowly in the direction Thor headed. They make swifter progress than they would have done going at it alone, and Sam actually takes far more of Barnes' weight than Tony's aching back and neck can handle. "Don't suppose you spotted anything big, green and angry while you were getting a piggyback from the big guy?" Tony's still really hoping that a Hulked out Bruce fell on one of the enemy tanks.

"Sorry." Sam shakes his head. "He gonna be okay?"

It's easy to say yes, because physically Bruce will be fine. Mentally, emotionally, he'll be a wreck. It's not as bad when he chooses the change, but when it's forced on him it almost always comes with one hell of a hangover.

"The Hulk, you know...he's like Gumby." Tony doesn't know how to explain it. How to explain any of them, really. They're all so messed up in their own ways. The world sees what they want to see, but they don't have eyes on the behind the scenes. They celebrate Steve's heroism and Natasha's ability to go toe to toe with the big boys - they don't see all that Steve's sacrificed, or that beneath all her badass ability to get shit done, Natasha is actually a whole lot more vulnerable than anyone would believe. They praise Clint's ability to hit any target under any circumstance - they don't see him training until his fingers bleed because he's afraid the one time he misses will be the one time he loses everything. They admire Thor as a god, but have no concept of the man who has lost most of the family he has. They don't acknowledge Doctor Bruce Banner at all, not his incredible brain, his kindness, or his sharp, quick wit, just the Hulk.

And with Tony...well, they see exactly what Tony wants them to.

He wonders what they will see in Barnes. If they, like HYDRA, will see only the weapon forged and not the man who was torn apart in the making.

Drugging him is probably, unequivocally, a terrible idea. They have no idea how he'll react to it and none of the scenarios they have encountered so far are particularly appealing. They need a plan really, some way of handling whichever one of his fractured personalities comes to the surface. In many ways, the Winter Soldier is the easiest to deal with, but Tony feels sick with himself just for wishing to see those cold, dead eyes again.

But he knows that neither he nor Sam can do much good if Barnes has another violent break or an anxiety attack. Maybe they need to get Thor to put him under again.

But if feels too much like a containment, like Barnes is just a malfunctioning machine they need to put away until he's fixed. It feels too much like following in Lukin's footsteps and putting Barnes on ice just because his emotional bleeds are too much to deal with. He won't do that. He can't do that. If taking the easy option means emulating HYDRA in any way, Tony would rather take the chance that Barnes might try kill him again.

Tony pushes the thought from his mind and focuses instead on putting one foot in front of the next. He's not thinking about Barnes, or Natasha, or Clint, or Steve, or Bruce. Or how with one fell swoop two thirds of his family might just be snatched away from him.

Barnes is stirring from his drug induced unconsciousness just as they spot Thor standing alone

amidst a field full of cows and all that is left of Tony's jet.

Tony and Sam both tense, though Sam has the added benefit of Barnes' metal arm being looped over his shoulders.

He's afraid of what they will be facing as they pause, allowing Barnes to come out of the last dregs of his slumber with a little less added vertigo.

They are worried about violence, but they don't need to be.

Barnes makes a soft, terrified sound in the back of his throat and suddenly Tony wishes he was being strangled again. That sound aside, he makes no attempt at all to fight them. He is docile and meek, much like he was when Tony saw him removed from cryostasis. He's letting them manhandle him how they please, he's letting them touch him when Tony knows now how much he doesn't like it. Barnes doesn't fight them or resist in anyway, he simply continues to hang from their arms like a broken toy. He can see the guilt in Sam's eyes as they share a glance over Barnes's shoulder.

Tony so badly wants to say something, but the only words that spring to mind are *you're okay, we're not going to hurt you, you're safe*, and they are words Lukin must have said to him time and time again. They die in his throat, tasting like bile and desperation.

He motions Sam to pause and they try and help Barnes stand, to regain his balance and his strength enough that he can support himself without having to allow the contact. It's successful only in the sense that he does as he is told and gets his own feet beneath him purely because Tony puts them there.

Until Thor approaches, carrying Steve's abandoned shield. Barnes must catch sight of it in the edge of his vision because suddenly he steps forward, quicker stronger than either Tony or Sam could've believed him capable of until two seconds ago, and takes the shield from Thor's hands. Tony has no idea what to expect, but Barnes merely clutches the shield and makes a soft, small sound of distress as he runs his fingers over the charred metal.

This is something new -- this is the first real sign that the many shades of his personality are finally starting to blur together.

Tony doesn't know what to do. The last time Bucky had an episode, Steve took the brunt of it. He doesn't want Sam to be right, he doesn't want Barnes to be sedated against his will, but they're quickly running out of options - and Tony knows that if Barnes doesn't snap himself out of his current state, then he's only going to react with violence when they are forced to intervene. They can't stay out here forever.

Thor's eyes are sad and troubled as he steps around Barnes, who drops to his knees and continues to emit soft sounds of distress.

"They have been taken," Thor says to Sam and Tony grimly. "I found only this," he holds out his hand and Tony can just about see the fine thread of a silver chain, hanging from his fingers. A delicate arrow splits it in the middle. It's Natasha's. Tony knows because he helped Clint find it. "I could find no sign of either Natasha or Clint," Thor says in distress, "but this chain. Here-" he looks behind him at the wreckage. It seems a fitting expression of their lives right now- they are nothing but the broken pieces of a whole. Maybe the only pieces left standing.

Tony's heartache is echoed on Thor's face. "I found only Steven's shield. This...it is not perhaps a bad thing." He says the last part hopefully, almost earnestly.

“How is it not a bad thing?” Tony demands, glaring at Thor, his own anguish caught in his throat. “How is *any* of this not bad?”

“Because if they have been taken, then their captors wish them alive.” Thor says, a dark glint behind his eyes. “And if they are alive, we will find them.”

Captain America is a valuable hostage, but Tony can’t think of many reasons why whoever shot them down would take two injured spies captive instead of simply killing them on the spot. The ones he can think of lead only to terrible, terrifying places. Tony has no idea what knowledge either of them possess, only that they’ve been at the center of world politics espionage in one way or another for almost a decade now. He knows neither of them will crack under torture. He’s afraid of it.

“We don’t know who is behind this,” Tony points out. “It could be HYDRA, it could be SHIELD...it could be fucking PETA for all we know. And Steve will actually kill me if we bring Barnes anywhere near whoever it is they turn out to be.” Tony has to point out, leaving off the *‘if he’s not already dead himself’* that hangs in the air nonetheless.

Sam just shakes his head and casts a wary eye in Barnes’ direction before turning back to the wreckage and scavenging for weapons. Knowing Barton and Natasha, there have to be a few laying around.

Barnes’ stopped keening now, his gaze losing that haunted edge as something colder creeps in. “Steve doesn’t see what the world sees when he looks at him,” Sam whisper, his eyes trained on Barnes. “And speaking as someone Barnes didn’t consider enough of a threat to put all that much effort into killing, trust me on this: that look he’s got right there? Best thing we can do is point him in the right direction and keep a safe distance.”

Barnes takes that as his cue, hefting Steve’s shield onto his arm. Tony’s always considered it a part of Steve, a symbol of his commitment to justice and duty. Surprisingly it looks no less right on Barnes’ arm, though his definition of justice might be a little more loose.

He sets off at a brisk pace. Tony and Thor share a slightly panicked look before they all jog after him. “Um, where exactly are you going? We have no idea where they took them.”

“So we find someone who does.” Barnes says flatly.

Which seems fine in principle... “And then what? Just hope they’re feeling chatty?”

“They’ll talk.” Barnes says. Tony is pretty sure he’s never heard anything more terrifying.

“You are certain?” Thor asks him from his other side as he falls into step with them.

Barnes doesn’t look at either of them. His gaze is fixed dead ahead on a barn in the distance. “They always talk.”

Tony stands corrected. That right there?

Scariest shit he’s heard in his life.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

I don't know about you, but I've been waiting for this chapter for ages! :D

Popcorn?

EDIT:[Silvanoir](#) made the most amazing art for this chapter! You should check it out!

“We’re, er, we’re not just gonna let him loose on the first folks we come across, are we?” Sam asks in a whisper as they follow in Barnes’ wake. He’s salvaged one of Natasha’s rifles and has it resting in the crook of his arm with an ease that suggests he’s incredibly familiar with carrying a weapon like it. “Cos I feel like that might be just a tad irresponsible.”

“He seems to know what he’s doing?” It comes out a question more than a statement and Tony can only shrug his shoulders helplessly. Thor echoes the statement so that really only leaves Barnes himself.

Either he’ll give them a straight answer, or he’ll beat them to death with Steve’s shield. Both look like fairly plausible options.

“So, um...plan of attack? Care to share?” Tony tries as he double-times in a vain, painful attempt to keep up with Barnes, who is still marching on, stare fixed unblinkingly on the barn ahead of them.

Honestly, Tony doesn’t really expect an answer, so when he gets one he almost trips over in shock. “There is no sign of the hostiles,” Barnes says, his usually dull, flat voice now colored with something that sounds like brewing violence.

“No,” Tony agrees. “No, there is not. Ideas?” There are fascinating parallels here, he thinks. Barnes is a tactical thinker - he was even before he was brainwashed. All the things Steve knows about strategy and planning, he’s learned from Barnes, who had years of military experience even before Steve enlisted.

“They have a base of operations close by. They appeared and then disappeared too quickly.”

“And the barn is the only building in the vicinity.” Tony nods to himself. “Okay, I’ll bite. Why is a barn in the middle of the countryside doubling as a secret base for...is this HYDRA’s S.O.P?”

“No.” Barnes says. “HYDRA would have executed Barton and Romanov.” Barnes sounds like he’s giving a mission briefing, cold and precise. How many of these must he have done over the course of seventy years, Tony wonders? As harrowing it is to hear HYDRA’s M.O. so clearly stated, Tony’s desperately grateful now, knowing that they are dealing with someone else.

Then comes the knowledge that *they are dealing with someone else*. An unknown entity.

“Suggestions? Ideas? Wild stabs in the dark?”

“MI19.” Barnes says.

Tony swallows. "You sure?"

"There are no civilian or paramilitary cells in the area with the assets we have encountered."

MI19. The people who had Steve so freaked out when Clint had mentioned them. The former branch of the British War Office who made the CIA look mild mannered and ineffective. The super elite government group who were supposed to have been decommissioned the same year Steve and Barnes went MIA. The guys so shady and mysterious that even Howard Stark spoke about them with wary unease. Those guys.

"Great." He says. "That's just great."

"You seem concerned." Thor frowns. "Are our enemies known to you?"

"Concerned? Why would I be concerned? It's not like we're just trekking through a field after a bunch of guys who aren't supposed to exist anymore kidnapped our friends, two of whom are possibly already dead. Concern, nah, this isn't concern this is--"

"Breathe, man." Sam interrupts him calmly, forcing Tony to suck in a large lungful of air, his bruised throat - bruised everything really - protesting like a bitch.

"I'm good." Tony waves away Sam's look of concern. "We're good. Hey, um-" He wants to call Barnes Bucky because that is the only name he's ever vocally identified himself with. He also doesn't want to get strangled again, so he flounders for a second then just decides to bypass names altogether. "So, do we have an actual plan? Like, you do this and I do that and together we unite in the force of our- you know what? I don't even know why I'm trying." He trails off at the completely blank look Barnes shoots him. He might be used to mission briefings but he sure as hell doesn't know how to express his thoughts on anything.

By the time they reach the barn though, Tony's convinced Barnes is on the money. It looks unoccupied and innocuous, but there are tracks in the dirt that are fresh. It gives him hope, that they are this close. He wants it to be this easy. Surely they deserve some luck?

"This doesn't seem right." Sam says from behind them. "If we're in the right place, shouldn't there be some kind of proximity alarm or a watch, or *something*?"

Tony's got to admit he has a point. They've made it all the way up to the barn doors. There should be some indication that they are being watched. Or about to be shot. Or blown up by one of those damn tanks.

And really, how the hell do you fit that many tanks in one barn?

But then Barnes says, "There is," and kicks the barn door right off it's hinges. It's no wonder there is no sign of the enemy because they have literally gone underground.

There's no empty space beyond them, no farmyard equipment or cows or tractors or guy sitting behind a desk with the words 'Evil Government Lair' stamped on the wall behind him. Just a descending path leading down, through the hillside.

Well, that and a shit ton of guys with guns.

Thor pulls Tony out of the line of fire just as Sam ducks into the wall and uses the remains of the door for cover. It's perfect timing and Thor is the only reason Tony doesn't get shot in the head. Tony's grateful for the save - he might not admit it, he sure as hell doesn't like it, but he is more vulnerable without the suit.

Barnes doesn't seem bothered by the fact that he's standing there in just sneakers and casual, cotton clothes, armed only with a star spangled shield and an unhealthy dose of righteous fury.

There is something intensely hypnotic about watching him fight. While he'll never have the pound for pound strength that Thor and the Hulk have at their disposal, he is easily the most brutally efficient fighter Tony has ever seen in action. He's terrifyingly fast and each movement he makes is designed with the sole purpose of inflicting as much damage as possible with as little effort. He uses the shield as efficiently as any other part of his body, blocking any gunfire aimed at him as he continues to fight.

He's vastly outnumbered but seems to neither notice or care, moving steadily through the space and picking off soldiers as and when he reaches them. The layout of the long, relatively narrow corridor nullifies the efficiency of the enemy's numbers and Tony gets a feeling that this isn't one of their primary locations, but a site that depends entirely on being overlooked for its defense.

Either that or no one has briefed them on how to engage a seriously unhappy James Barnes. To be fair, it's probably not standard operating procedure. It maybe should be, from now on.

Bad guys of the world beware: the Winter Soldier will fuck your shit up (so seriously, leave Steve Rogers out of your evil schemes).

When one soldier gets in close enough to deliver a strike aimed at his head, Barnes does a goddamn pirouette in mid-air and snaps the guy's neck with an upswinging roundhouse. It's while he's contorted in that position that he makes another move, and a second later there is a gleam of sharp metal reflecting the overhead strip lights.

"I know that knife." Tony says, peering around Thor curiously to get a better look at the wickedly sharp blade Barnes uses to stab one soldier in the throat before flipping it in his hand and burying it into the chest of a second. "That's one of my kitchen knives! When the hell did he steal one of my kitchen knives and oh my god, *has he been armed this whole time?*"

He's not sure which is worse: that Barnes has somehow been able to palm one of Tony's knives despite the constant supervision he's been under, or that Steve knowingly allowed him access to sharp objects. He's just relieved that the armor had been enough of a deterrent to force Barnes to try strangle him instead of just stabbing him repeatedly in the chest. "I'm never going to be able to cook in my own kitchen again." Tony whines, his eyes wide and transfixed by the lightening fast and seriously gory way Barnes is working his way through the soldiers dumb enough to come at him one on one.

"Be glad he's just got the one of 'em." Sam says sagely. "Seriously, the hardware he was packing in D.C.? Guy coulda invaded a small country by himself."

"Are we gonna, you know...help?" Tony feels the need to ask, because all they are really doing right now is hanging back and watching, like they are at a particularly thrilling baseball game. So far Barnes has shown no indication that he either wants, requires or expects their assistance, but Tony still feels a little awkward just following in the wake of all this carnage.

"You wanna get up in there, be my guest." Sam shakes his head firmly. Tony looks at Thor expectantly. Thor can always be counted on to wade into a fight.

But this time he merely has his arms crossed over his chest, a mildly curious look on his face as he watches Barnes utterly annihilate everything in his path. When he catches Tony staring he merely shrugs. "If he requires my assistance I will give it gladly. Until then, I shall not interfere in the way a fellow warrior choses to express their emotions.."

“Express their emotions...” Tony echoes in disbelief. “He’s not taking up knitting! This is not a healthy, hey, lets work through our issues and sing songs around campfires-“

“We never sing songs around campfires.” Sam cuts in with a slight frown. Tony ignores him and continues to rant.

“This is...I don’t really know what this is, but it is violent! Very violent!” His point is underpinned by a choked scream as Barnes brings his heel down on the inside of a soldier’s knee, snapping the bone clean in two.

“I would have thought you would approve.” Thor remarks in surprise.

“So would I.” Tony admits. “But it turns out approval looks very much like Steve’s *this is not okay face*, and frankly I’m a smidge freaked out by it. Also, possibly concussed.”

There’s a sudden lack of sound as Tony finishes speaking. They all look back at Barnes, who is standing quite calmly in the middle of what can only be described as a small mountain of bodies.

“See?” Thor says with a jovial grin as he smacks Tony on the back, “He fights well!”

Barnes pulls Tony’s kitchen knife out of someone’s larynx and Tony swears he’s not going to pass out. How has his life come to involve this much casual violence?

“Don’t even think about putting that back where you found it.” Tony says sternly to Barnes, who ignores him entirely and continues down the hallway.

“Get the gun!” Sam shouts at Tony.

“What gun?” Tony yells back. He can see lots of guns, but not one he really wants to be going for. Most are in the hands of very, very dead men. “Right, right!” He grabs himself a semi-automatic pistol and snags another few cartridges for Sam.

They follow Barnes, stopping when they reach double doors made of a thick, durable metal. This is where they could really use Bruce. Tony nudges Thor. “Now are you going to be helpful?”

Thor says nothing but approaches Barnes, who looks set to try pry the doors apart with his bare hands. “If might might assist you?” Thor offers. Barnes stares at him and for a second Tony isn’t sure if there is anyone at home in there after all.

Then he takes a step back and lets Thor swing Mjolnir with enough force to take the entire door apart.

“You guys are crazy as fuck.” Sam says at Tony’s side.

“You should see us at Christmas.” Tony nods. “How many superheroes does it take to decorate a tree?” He’s joking of course. They’ve never done Christmas together. Tony has every intention of changing that if they all survive this. When. Tony corrects himself. Not if. When.

For a second, Sam just gapes at him. Then, with the aplomb that Tony has come to expect from him, he shoulders his rifle a little higher, focusing on the task at hand and trying not to think about the batshit crazy he’s neck deep in. Tony likes Sam. He really likes him. He doesn’t know how to handle that. He can count on the one hand the number of people he’s actively liked in the past ten years and then all of a sudden he’s drowning in obnoxiously endearing assholes, none of whom have the self preservation God gave a lemming, and all of whom are probably going to give Tony an ulcer or a heart attack or both. It’s all very disconcerting.

Tony's train of thought is brutally interrupted by a hail of gunfire. Tony's jerked back by a strong arm just in time to glimpse the hangar behind the cracked doors. When he looks up, he's shocked to see that it is Barnes who is covering him, Steve's shield deflecting several bullets as he forces Tony behind him. Given that less than an hour ago Barnes was trying to kill him, Tony doesn't think you can blame him for being confused.

They're caught in the doorway with only the options of pushing on forward or retreating. Tony is sure as hell not going back, and neither are the others. Thor engages fully now, taking out several shooters with that hammer of his just as Barnes hurls the shield across the open hangar. It ricochets off bodies and weapons alike before the arch of its trajectory returns it to his hand.

Sam returns the gunfire with his own shots and Tony refuses to be the damsel in distress here. He's still the smartest guy in the room and he plans on putting that to use.

Which is why his eyes land on the plane standing behind the hail of bullets. Its motors are engaged, its propellers in motion. Beyond it, another set of doors are slowly opening, revealing a runway that was hidden by the cluster of hills they were behind.

It doesn't take a genius to know what's about to happen.

It doesn't take Tony Stark to understand that their friends are most likely on that plane.

"We need to stop it from taking off." Tony yells at Barnes, who gets the message and instead of throwing the shield again and taking out their attackers from a distance, simply throws himself along with it, using the sleek metal edge to skid forward across the ground like a toboggan before recoiling off a stack of metal crates and slamming the edge of the shield down on the skull of one of the soldiers.

Thor is only seconds behind Barnes' kamikaze display, leaving Tony and Sam the perfect opening as they face the few panicked soldiers still standing.

Tony moves forward, pulling the trigger on a gun he's never used before and hoping it catches something vital in their attackers. He's not the world's greatest marksman, okay? Sam blows a guy's head off with a single, precise shot, bracing his other arm on Tony's chest as he pulls him back into line.

"I am not explaining to Captain America that I let you get shot." He yells angrily. "I like my life. I value my life. I want to keep living it for a very long time."

"You might want to reevaluate your extra curricular activities, then." Tony tells him as they dodge a barrage of bullets.

"No shit!" Sam shouts back, spinning around to take out a soldier who seems to appear out of nowhere only to be beaten to the kill as Tony's goddamned kitchen knife flies through the air and embeds itself in his throat.

Across the hanger, Barnes has already turned back to other targets, ripping the gun out of one man's hands and tearing it apart to use as separate weapons of his own. Turns out a gun can be just useful after it is out of ammunition so long as it is in the hands of an angry off ex-soviet assassin.

"We need to open the cargo hold!" Tony turns back to the task at hand, bodily grabbing Sam by the shoulders and pulling him out of the way as Thor's hammer hurtles over their heads.

"How?" Sam shouts.

“Just get me to the panel!” Tony knows if he can access a control port then he can at least open the door. He might even be able to kill the engines. It’s only one chance they need, and it has to be enough.

“Right!” Sam pushes forwards. He’s got to be low on ammunition by now, but he is conservative with his shots. Tony’s now too busy hurtling across the short distance between them and the plane to really pay much attention. He’s got his gaze fixed on the emergency control panel and an inherent trust in the people he’s with. They’ll watch his back while he does his thing.

He doesn’t have cause to regret that, even as he plows right over the one moron stupid enough to try get between him and his target.

A body falls right in front of him as that damn hammer speeds through the air close enough to brush Tony’s shoulder. Tony doesn’t let that stop him and closes the final distance.

As soon as his fingers are on the panel he’s crashing through the system, breaking it open and digging his fingers through the controls as the carnage behind him continues. He’s in his own little zone and it takes only seconds for him to find what he needs.

As soon the cargo doors are opening, Tony’s scrambling around to get access, climbing up into the belly of the plane.

The shooting has stopped. The sounds of violence outside the plane die down to silence.

Tony can do nothing but stare as Barnes races inside to join him.

There is no Steve. No Natasha or Clint. The belly of the plane is empty. It’s a diversion.

And they fell for it.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

ALL the love needs to go to my amazing [editor](#), because this chapter was a hot mess before she got her hands on it!

I am armed with [kittens and puppies](#), should you decide you need them.

Discussion of torture, and non graphic torture, ahead.

Barnes doesn't wait around before stalking through the belly of the plane up to the cockpit. Tony doesn't follow. He can't, not at this point. He's too numb, too tired, too far gone beyond the crippling worry that's eating him up from the inside. He stays rooted to the spot, even as Thor begins to stalk the perimeter, looking for what they might have missed. He's not having an anxiety attack, he can recognize them by now, but he's having *something*. A nervous break maybe? That heart attack he's sure he's been working towards this last week?

"Easy." Sam Wilson has the most ridiculously calming voice in existence. He's also looking at Tony with eyes that say he's been in exactly the same spot, feeling the same things, and he's come out the other side. They are eyes that say he knows Tony can do the same. "We're alright. We'll fix this. We'll find them."

There's a sound of tearing metal that stops Tony from answering, then a panicked, frightened shout from a voice that doesn't belong to any of their team. Barnes storms back into the cargo hold, a pilot - the one person they haven't killed in their quest to rescue their friends - squirming in the grip of his metal hand. He's trying to be brave, but Tony's been on the receiving end of the look Barnes has in his eyes now. It's terrifying. Barnes drops him down onto the ground and pins him there with a boot against his sternum. It would take him no effort at all to push down and snap bones like brittle twigs.

Tony swallows, knowing exactly where this is going. A part of him isn't ready for it. Another part has been expecting it ever since they left Steve behind.

"Well this is...I don't even know what this is."

Tony spins around on his heels and wavers on his feet dizzily, but he can't stop the wide, relieved grin stretching across his face at the sound of Bruce's voice.

He's wearing one of the uniforms of the fallen soldiers -- Tony figures he's probably pilfered one on his way in. Overall he looks unharmed, just regular bumps and bruises, but Tony can see the deep lines of stress around his eyes. "Doc! Glad you could make it. How'd you find us?"

"There's a literal trail of bodies." Bruce says wryly as he picks his way over to them amidst the rubble. "Wasn't hard. What happened? Where are the others?"

"This fellow is about to tell us," Thor says, pulling Bruce into a very enthusiastic one armed hug, gesturing to the pilot with his other hand. Bruce pats Thor on the shoulder absently, his gaze focused on Barnes and the man currently gasping for breath beneath his boot.

“He probably needs to breathe in order to do that, no?” Bruce suggests to Barnes, who wears a mask of ice cold hostility, his unblinking eyes fixed on the pilot. He eases the pressure of his boot just a little, enough so the man can breathe, but gives no more ground. He looks as if he’s fighting with himself just to be so restrained. “Where is he?” He demands icily.

The pilot cringes. “I-I don’t-” his panicked gaze flickers between Barnes and the bodies that lay still and silent where they have fallen.

Barnes pulls his leg back and kicks him in the ribs, not hard, not by his standards, but it is enough to drive a sob from the pilot, who doubles over in pain.

They are going to do this, then. Tony thinks absently back to how uneasy he’d been with the thought of torturing Rumlow. Had it only been 24 hours since he, Clint and Natasha had gone to DC? The thought of them makes the blood run cold in his veins, and he looks back at the pilot convulsing on the ground with a sick sense of righteous fury. Twenty-four hours ago might as well be another life. He’s come a long way since then.

But if Tony’s okay with what Barnes is doing, Sam is not. He takes a step towards Barnes, until he is level with the pilot on the ground and can place himself in Barnes’ eyeline. “Bucky,” Sam says cajolingly, reaching out his hand as if to show he means no harm. “Think about this. Would Steve want you to do this?”

That gets a genuine reaction from Barnes, who cocks his head to one side, his brows pulled together thoughtfully. He flinches and screws his face up in pain, but the moment passes quickly and his eyes are cold once again when he looks up. “Steve ain’t here.” There’s that soft Brooklyn twang again. That’s a good sign, isn’t it, that some part of him is clawing back up with the rest?

Sam clenches his jaw as Barnes turns back to their hostage. “You telling me you’re okay with this?” He asks Tony, who no, *God no* he’s not okay with it, but at the same time *yes*, yes he is.

“If he answers our questions then he need come to no harm.” Thor says calmly, the ‘*if not, then...tough luck*’ left silent, but no less clear. Bruce’s expression is equally as steely. It’s a rare thing to see Bruce’s eyes devoid of compassion, but when it comes to the military, to spies and to government agents, there are is only a very small percentage he tolerates, let alone likes. The rest of them, Tony recalls him saying, can take an express train direct to hell for all he cares. He won’t get between Barnes and his target, not when the pilot has information they need. It’s actually a miracle he’s not still green and breaking things.

When he doesn’t get the response he is hoping for from either Thor or Bruce, Sam turns a slightly pleading look on Tony.

“You and Natasha kicked a guy off a building.” Tony reminds him, remembering the little Steve has told him about their escapades with HYDRA.

“We scared him.” Sam says flatly. “We weren’t going to hurt him. You’re honestly telling me the same thing applies here?” He glances back over to Barnes, who is almost trembling with tightly contained violence. Sam might have a point, but Sitwell is as dead as the pilot is going to be, and the blood will be one Barnes’ hands just the same.

So no. Of course Tony can’t say that they’re just going to scare him. The gray areas in their lives are growing bigger day by day and in all honesty, Tony has no idea where on the scale they sit any more.

“He’s done it before.” Tony can only say, as if that makes everything okay. In truth he’s not sure if

he wants to be the kind of person who is okay with what Barnes is doing, or if he wants to be like Sam and be able to draw a line in the sand that he doesn't cross. He wishes it could be that simple, but like most things in his life, it really isn't.

"We're not HYDRA." Sam shakes his head, looking at Barnes, "You don't have to do that anymore. You have a choice."

Barnes doesn't respond, but he does, for a second, look visibly torn. Tony actually knows what is happening here and it makes his heart ache.

The part of his mind that is Bucky can't cope with the things that he has done as the Winter Soldier, and that's understandable. The problem, Tony thinks, is that the same part of him that is emerging from the ashes of all that he's endured cannot look at the fractured pieces of his former life and say that James Barnes was an innocent man. Because he wasn't.

The stories Tony had been told as a boy made that perfectly clear. Steve was the Allies' shield - their hope and their duty, the ideal to be lived up to. The world has always celebrated him for that. They celebrate Bucky, too. Steve's unfailingly loyal friend, the embodiment of the sacrifices you sometimes have to make when you believe so devoutly in the ideals Steve represents.

What the public stories very rarely address is that Bucky sacrificed far more than just his life for Steve's ideals. Captain America might have been the shield, but shields don't win wars unless they are accompanied by guns. There were a lot of things Bucky did that Steve couldn't because of who and what he was.

Which means there are a lot of memories in Barnes' head now, ones that are going to slowly start coming to the surface and confuse the hell out of him.

"You don't have to do this." Sam says again, softer this time.

But Barnes clenches his jaw and looks Sam dead in the eye. "And you don't have to watch." It's as close to him putting his hand up and saying *yes, this is my choice*, as Tony thinks they are going to get.

Sam's shoulders slump and he glances away.

"This is for Steve." Tony tells Sam gently, because he knows Steve and Sam have bonded over the past few weeks, but there's still something of that hero worship lurking in the back of Sam's eyes. He might understand better than most that Captain America is a soldier, and that war is never as clean and righteous as it's later presented to be, but he doubts very much Steve's confided some of the SSRs dirtier secrets to his new friend. "I'm sure he's got a considerably more extensive repertoire now, but he was doing this long before HYDRA got a hold of him." Tony looks at Barnes, "Right, Bucky?"

Barnes cocks his head to one side and calmly palms his knife. "They took Steve, Sam." And really, that says it all.

Sam's jaw tightens. He doesn't like this, he doesn't want to stand for this, and he's probably real disappointed that Earth's Mightiest Heroes are going to let it happen. Tony feels bad for him, he does.

But not enough to stop it.

"You could just tell us." Tony tries again, addressing the cowering pilot. "Save us all a lot of grief and time and therapy bills."

“I-I don’t- know-“ The pilot stammers, his wide eyes still fixed on Barnes. He’s smart enough to know where the threat is coming from at least, that’s something in his favor.

“Look,” Tony says impatiently, “either you tell us where our friends are now, or he will torture you, and you will tell us later. You do know who he is, right?” The pilot nods shakily. It’s no wonder he’s scared, even if he has been trained for this sort of thing. Barnes is the boogeyman of the Intelligence Community. He’s the monster under the bed. There is no training for something like this, and he seems to know it. “Great. Good, that’s good.” Tony nods, “So you know he’s got seventy years experience and a pretty good catalogue of information to go by. This is in no way going to end well for you.”

“What he’s saying,” Bruce cuts in, his kind eyes fixed on Sam, “is that he’s not actually the worst thing that can happen to you, so please don’t make us watch him torture you.” Despite the lightness of his voice, Bruce’s back is ramrod straight, fists clenched at his sides, shaking minutely; Tony knows that the only thing standing between them and the Hulk right now is the mountain of Bruce’s considerable willpower.

The pilot swallows. He looks like he’s trying to recall everything he’s ever learned about resisting torture, and maintaining one’s composure. It doesn’t seem to be helping.

Can anyone really be trained to do anything other than piss their pants in fear when they look into the cold eyes of the Winter Soldier and know what fate is awaiting them?

“The underground.” The pilot finally says, looking about like a helpless animal. He must’ve weighed his options by now, and finally realized there is no way out of this. If they don’t kill him, his superiors will. The only control he has left is to choose how quick his death is going to be. There’s something reassuring in knowing that even as fractured and floundering as they are, the Avengers (& Co) are still the greater of two evils. “There is a subterranean train line that connects us to the city.”

They are all taken by surprise by the speed with which Barnes hits him. It comes out of nowhere and the ringing cry of pain is jarring. “We didn’t see anything when we came in.” Barnes says, not looking in the least bit happy that he might be being lied to.

Tony can’t say he disagrees. “I know we were a little distracted but I don’t think any of us would have missed that.”

“No, no please!” The man screams, terrified as Barnes hauls him up by the front of the shirt and places the edge of the knife under the fleshy part of his ear, “the entrance is hidden! You have to know where you’re looking!”

“Show me.” Barnes orders coldly.

Barnes lets the man drop to the floor, calmly hefting Steve’s shield back on to his arm. The pilot doesn’t try running, he just scrambles to his feet, white faced and panting. When he doesn’t move, Barnes takes a menacing step forward and that is enough to encourage activity.

The pilot leads them back out into the main tunnel, trying to avoid looking at the vast number of his fallen co-workers. He takes them to a blank space in the wall and stops. “Here.” He says.

“Open it.” Barnes orders.

The pilot blanches. “I don’t have access, I can’t-“

Two things happen at once. Thor swings the hammer at the wall with enough force to reduce it to

rubble, and Barnes reaches over and snaps the pilot's neck with a casual twist of his wrist.

It's somehow far more harrowing to see him do that than it is to recall the number of people he's killed with Tony's kitchen knife.

Sam looks a little uneasy, but Barnes turns a blank look on him and says, "I didn't torture him." Which is true, in a way. Tony doesn't know if he considers what Barnes just did as torture. He supposes on paper it is, and he's no real expert on the subject, but those three months in an Afghan cave were hardly a picnic, and after seeing some of the recordings of Barnes' own experiences, it feels...unseemly to start up a comparison.

Rather than get into it, Tony focuses on the hole in the wall Thor has just created. The space beyond is illuminated well by strip lights - it is a small platform with one single track leading into the dark tunnel just beyond the reach of the light.

"By the looks of it, there is only one train on the line." Bruce says, climbing through the wall and studying the controls.

"So we follow the tracks?" Sam asks, shifting his rifle higher on his shoulder and following.

"That'll take too long." Tony shakes his head. "I can probably jimmy up something to speed the process up, maybe build a motor--"

"Either way," Bruce shakes his head, "if they reach their destination before we catch up to them then we'll have no way of knowing where to look next."

"I'm genuinely regretting not getting you all microchipped." Tony mutters, poking at the console in an attempt to summon up a point of destination.

"I might even be up for that." Bruce sighs. "How long is it going to take you?"

"Um," Tony looks around and thinks. He can probably salvage everything he needs from parts of the plane, and between him and Bruce the process will probably be faster, so maybe - "two and a half hours? Less with coffee. We don't have any coffee, do we?"

"Think I saw a Starbucks in one of the fields back there." Sam mutters. Tony snorts. Like he ever drinks Starbucks. Okay once. Twice. Desperate circumstances, both times.

"There is another option." Thor says, his expression both troubled and resolved. "But I must ask that you trust me."

"Think we're beyond that at this point, buddy." Tony says, pinching his nose, his head swimming. He really, really wants to lay down. Nap for a few years. But they can't. This is his area of expertise. He needs to be the one being proactive. "What do you have in mind?"

"I need you to join hands and do not let go." Thor says seriously.

"Were you expecting that?" Sam leans over and asks Bruce in a loud whisper. Bruce shakes his head, nonplussed. "Okay, good."

Tony shares a skeptical glance with Bruce, then links arms with him and Sam, then the three of them look hesitantly at Barnes, who stares back like he's a cornered animal about to make a jump for their throats.

"This will not hurt." Thor promises him, using the same low, soothing voice he's turned on Barnes

in the past. Barnes doesn't look like he cares if what Thor is planning will hurt or not. He's utterly soaked in blood and Tony has no idea how much of it is his own. He'd been bleeding badly after the crash, but that should have stopped by now and shouldn't account for the way his hands and clothes are practically dripping red. "It is the fastest way to recover our friends. To find Steven." That does it. Barnes turns his gaze away from Tony and looks up at Thor. He doesn't nod or give any indication that he's in agreement to what is being planned, but he doesn't shy away when Thor wraps an arm around his back and pulls him into the side of his chest.

Thor then pulls Tony, Bruce and Sam in close, and while he's not quite giving all four of them a bear hug, it sure as hell feels like that's coming. The thought strikes him as particularly funny and he chuckles to himself, attracting a worried look from Bruce, who doesn't seem all that keen to be tucked under the arm of a demigod, but still bears it with the zen-like calm Tony envies him so much.

"Heimdall, at your leave." Thor says, looking up at the sky.

"Whoa, wait, what?" Tony yelps, then digs his fingers into Sam's arm as they are suddenly being jerked through space onto another-- planet? Dimension? Why is this happening? Don't they have enough problems without adding interstellar transport to the list? What if he lets go by accident and ends up tumbling into the swirly, starry void of-- *holy crap that's a nebula.*

They're space traveling. They're traveling through space. This is incredible. This is groundbreaking. This is—

He's going to throw up.

He's also going to have serious words with Thor, because really? Could he not have introduced Tony to the glorious realities of physics when his head didn't feel like it was about to split down the middle?

Then, as suddenly as they are traveling, they stop, stepping out onto a golden platform of shimmering colors. There's a towering figure in the most ornate armor Tony's ever seen, his hands wrapped around the helm of an absolutely enormous sword.

Behind them, the stars of the universe twinkle in beautiful symphonies of color. Bruce looks like he's about to start crying tears of nerdish joy and Sam is staring, slaw-jacked and open mouthed.

Barnes doesn't look half as freaked out as Tony is feeling he should, which, given that HYDRA have spent years screwing him around with psychotropic drugs, maybe a trip through time and space isn't all that new to him. He has, however, lost that cold edge that's been masking his features and is back to that frighteningly blank, almost submissive passiveness which suggests that he's waiting on something he's not going to enjoy.

Thor doesn't seem at all affected by what he's just done, and Tony is starting to understand that Asgard? Fucking lightyears ahead of them when it comes to science and technology.

On the one hand, this is so, so *so fucking cool.*

And on the other...

He glances down at the glimmering ground beneath his feet. Millions of colors collide together in a constantly moving iridescent road, as smooth as glass and as vibrant as precious jewels.

Tony looks up at Thor, who seems quite pleased to have brought them to his home.

“I always hated this level,” he says, waving an arm around himself to indicate the rainbow road stretching out into infinity. Thor’s expression crumples into confusion, and that’s the moment when Tony’s beaten, battered, frail and very non-superhuman body decides it’s had enough.

He’s dimly aware of Bruce shouting his name before he’s pitching backwards into the diamond speckled blackness of space.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

I promise faithfully that the Epic Reunion is coming very shortly!

Just, you know, not yet...

Many thanks to cjk1701 for the Russian translation and, as always, to my ever patient [editor](#) for not letting me get too distracted with TFLN.

I don't think you will need puppies and kittens for this chapter, but you can always find them (amidst the Stucky feels) on [my tumblr](#)!

EDIT:[Recidivae](#) made me cry with the sadest art for this chapter! Take a look and join me in the sobbing!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Congratulations, you’re not dead.”

Tony wakes up to find Bruce grinning down at him. The whole room is filled with warm, pale light and Tony rolls out the kinks in his shoulders. He feels like he’s slept for an eternity. There’s a light breeze drifting in from an open balcony and fine silk drapes float around what has to be the largest bed Tony’s ever slept in - and he’s slept in some really impressive beds over the years. There is a lot of carved wood and elegant decoration in the room, but it’s also scattered with random bits of technology that Tony knows are decades - if not more - ahead of anything they have on Earth. It’s like being in the middle of the strangest mix of old world romanticism and every sci-fi novel he’s ever read as a kid.

“Yay?” He says, yawning and stretching. He’s still not quite awake when he asks, “Where are we?”

“Asgard.” Bruce says. “Yes, it’s as incredible as we imagined, possibly more so, and yes, you’re a goddamn fucking idiot.” His friendly expression hasn’t changed, but Tony blinks and straightens when he sees the worry in Bruce’s dark eyes.

“Huh?”

“You passed out.”

“I did not.” Tony says, indignant.

“Yes. Yes you did. You nearly fell into space. Actual space. You can thank me for catching you by not being such a giant moron.”

“I get the feeling you’re unhappy with me.” Tony manages to sit himself up and thinks back to how he felt before Thor brought them on a magical mystery tour. “Which, I appreciate that you have every right to say ‘I told you so’.” Bruce had been the one to express the most concern over leaving the tower, he had been the one to outright say that Steve had made the wrong call. Tony had been too wrapped up in his own guilt. He hadn’t wanted to add to Steve’s pain by pushing.

“Yes, actually I do.” Bruce grumbles. “But I’m not. Tony, you should have said something. You were seriously hurt.”

Tony feels a twinge of guilt at being the cause of the worry in Bruce’s eyes. He hadn’t meant to cause any trouble, he’d just been more occupied with more important things. He hadn’t really thought he was in that bad a shape.

Tony tugs absently at the sleeves of his long over shirt. He seems to be wearing similar garb to Bruce, who is in a loose, casual shirt and pants in shades of earthy browns and greens. They aren’t too far away from the type of clothes Bruce might wear back home, but Tony has always been more of a jeans or suit kind of guy. He feels like he should be warming up for yoga.

He’ll always think of Bruce when he thinks of yoga, and now he is, he remembers why Bruce enjoys it so much. It helps him focus and keep his calm, two things he’s probably having problems with right now.

“I’m sorry.” He says, owning up to his part in adding to that stress.

“Yeah, well what with you and Bucky I’d say we’re the most exciting visitors Asgard has seen in a while, and that includes a possessed Jane Foster and an army of dark elves.” Bruce says mildly, settling back into the chair besides Tony’s bed.

“He making friends?” Tony groans, just imaging how Barnes is endearing himself to their hosts.

“Yeah well, apparently Odin’s on some diplomatic tour of the Nine Realms, so it was only the Vice Regent he passed out on.” Bruce shakes his head.

“Wait, what?” Tony jerks up in horror. His head is no longer swimming. He feels...actually, he feels pretty good. “What happened? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine.” Bruce promises, curling a hand over Tony’s shoulder and pushing him back down against the pillows. “Well, relatively speaking that is. He fractured seven ribs in the explosion and failed to mention it to anyone.”

“How is that okay?” Tony yelps. “That’s not okay! That’s not even a little okay! Oh god, Steve’s going to kill me. Like, actual death.” He’s supposed to be watching out for Barnes, to be keeping him safe, and what has he managed to do so far? Fail to take into account the fact that Barnes is incapable of expressing a need for medical help - which he knows and has already experienced, twice - and allowed him to march into an enemy stronghold with a ribcage that quite probably resembles a badly played game of Tetris.

“I wouldn’t worry about Steve. Thor’s convinced this is all his fault.” Bruce reassures him, “Apparently allowing not one but two of ones house guests to pass out and need emergency surgery - before any ale is consumed - is considered bad form. His buddies have been lecturing his hospitality skills non-stop.”

Oddly enough, Tony’s still not reassured. With Steve out of the picture right now, he feels like the entire responsibility for Barnes rests on his shoulders. He knows he’s not alone in this, he knows Bruce feels the same way, it’s just... well, Natasha is not the only one who is used to having to find the solution on their own. “Where is he?”

“With Heimdall,” Bruce says, adding, “Big guy with the sword,” when Tony frowns at him.

“I thought you said he needed surgery?” Tony says, confused.

“He did.” Bruce nods. “He had it and is healing up just fine. His regenerative abilities are almost as powerful as Steve’s. They used a quantum field generator to do a complete bio-scan, cloned the damaged lung tissue and then fused the bone fractures with a biodegradable cement.” He sounds a little more excited by the idea that is entirely appropriate, but then he’s always gotten over-excited by areas of scientific advancement.

There’s a nasty suspicion forming in Tony’s mind, one not helped by the stubborn way Bruce seems now to be avoiding his gaze. “How long have I been out for?”

“Tony-“

“How long?” Tony can’t help the way his hands - and his voice - shake. Have they just been sitting around here, waiting on his sorry ass while Steve, Natasha and Clint are in enemy hands? “Bruce, how long?”

He’s not imagining the shadows in Bruce’s eyes when he finally answers. “Two days.” Two days. Two days during which anything could have happened to their friends...their family, for fuck’s sake. What the hell were they thinking? They could have gone without Tony, they could have rallied all the armies of Asgard and wiped the scum off the face of the Earth, they could have - “Easy, Tony, they’re alive, I promise you they’re alive.” Bruce tries to calm him down, but without much luck.

He throws the sheets to one side and launches himself from the bed. His legs are actually far more stable than he has any right to expect them to be, and he spares a moment to feel immensely grateful of the fact that Asgardian medicine is as far advanced as any of their other technologies.

“We’re leaving. Right now.” Tony tells him. “Jesus, you should have gone already, you should have brought them back here, why-“

“Hey!” Bruce grabs him hard by the shoulders and gives him a stern little shake. It’s the first time Bruce has ever touched him in more than a fleeting manner and Tony stops short in surprise. He doesn’t see any trace of the Other Guy in Bruce right now, but what he does is enough to still Tony’s rising panic. “Look, Bucky only woke up this morning. Sam and Thor have been putting together a strategy and we were going to finalize this afternoon. We needed him, and you, to pull this off.”

“But what if they’re-“ Tony breaks off. He can’t think about what is happening to them. He can’t.

“They’re okay.” Bruce swears, his dark eyes warm and reassuring. “Heimdall - the guy who brought us up here-- turns out he’s got a real unique way of seeing the world: he’s keeping an eye on the others. Bucky’s with him.”

“I want to see him. I want to-“ To see Barnes, and to see Thor and Sam, to know what their plan is and to get it into motion. He wants them all back together again. He wants them safe.

“Alright.” Bruce nods, the grip on Tony’s shoulders now more supportive than restraining. “I’ll take you. Come on. You need shoes.”

“I don’t need shoes.” Tony protests.

“You need shoes.” Bruce repeated himself patiently.

Okay, so he does need shoes. They are met outside the room Tony’s been given by a blond haired man with steel and laughter in his eyes. Tony knows he is Fandral - he’s seen him in footage of Thor facing off against the Destroyer.

He gives them a customary greeting then leads them down towards the rainbow road he calls the Bifrost. He reiterates that Thor and Sam are in conference with the Lady Sif, whilst their warrior friend is in the company of the Watcher. Tony's dimly aware that for most people, this reassurance would be more than enough to indicate that Barnes is as safe as he can possibly be, but Tony will only believe that when he see it for himself.

"I should take you to the prince." Fandral says to them as they reach the grounds of the palace. "He will be pleased you are awake."

Tony hesitates. He needs to see Barnes.

Bruce catches the look on his face and turns to Fandral. "We can go. You should check on Bucky." Tony smiles gratefully as Fandral nods.

"Just follow the road," he says, sweeping his hand out towards the glimmering rainbow pathway.

It takes him the best part of an hour to walk from the palace to the end of the shimmering bifrost. Under normal circumstances, Tony would be fluttering about like the attention deficit butterfly Pepper accuses him of being, but his whole focus is pinned down on finding Barnes, making sure he is okay - that he's not let Steve down, again - and launching the mother of all attacks on the assholes who stand between them and their friends.

Tony hesitates as he reaches the end of the road and spots the hunched up figure sat looking out over the edge, staring out into space. If anyone should have an issue with heights, it's him, but Tony supposes HYDRA would have beaten that out of him along with any other things they deemed as weaknesses.

Barnes looks, well, he looks better than he did. Clean and wearing well fitting body armor. It's dark, suiting his need for stealth, and engraved with the seal of the Royal House of Asgard. Tony knows enough to know that it's a fairly big deal. Throughout history the heraldic of a family or house have always been deeply personal and protected. To allow or invite an outside to wear them is the ultimate indicator that they have been brought into the fold and offered the privileges and protections associated.

"How are you feeling?" Tony asks, sucking up his nerve and taking a seat next to Barnes. There's something very thrilling about looking down into the depths of space, something daring, but somehow he doesn't actually feel he's in any danger.

Barnes' gaze is fixed into the distance and his fingers curl around his knees. "Fine." He says, his voice a little rough, a little disused, but unmistakably his own. "I- I'm sorry. That I hurt you."

Tony's caught off guard by the apology. "Hey, no. You didn't. This," he waves an arm up and down, indicating the bumps and bruises that are slowly starting to fade, "This was totally the result of a plane blowing up with me in it. Not your fault."

"I tried to kill you." Barnes says quietly. By now, Tony's versed enough in Barnes's speech patterns to pick up when something new creeps into his usual monotone; it's not shame in his voice, but something very close.

Tony is tempted to make a joke and try cheer him up, but he senses the opportunity to do something more useful. "Did you, though?"

"I tried to strangle you." Barnes finally glances in his direction. Up close, Tony can see that his eyes are almost as blue as Steve's. A couple of shades darker, the odd streak of gray - it's fitting,

really.

“Well, okay, that was a thing, I’ll give you that.” Tony agrees, tracing a star he can see in the distance with the edge of his toes.

“A thing?” Barnes echoes. His tone’s still flat, but Tony thinks there’s an undercurrent of disbelief cracking through the words.

“A thing.” Tony nods. “But from where I’m standing, well, sitting really, I don’t think you actually wanted to kill me.”

“I didn’t?” Barnes is following the conversation with impressive lucidity. It’s the most the two of them have ever actually talked.

Tony looks him square in the eye. “I saw you plow your way through thirty men like they were nothing more than bugs in need of swatting to the side. If you really wanted to kill me? You’d have done it. Just like you’d have killed Steve on the Helicarrier.”

At the sound of Steve’s name, Barnes’ gaze flickers away and his shoulders draw up defensively. He’s silent for a moment, then he says, “I waited for him.” The words are so quiet Tony can almost believe they are meant for the ears of space alone. “I waited for him, but...”

“You remember?” He knows Barnes’ memories have been returning with increasing speed. He’s not surprised really. There has been a lot of trauma to trigger reactions, and his healing ability has been kicked into overdrive. He’s been out of cryo, unwired, for a month now. The few days between Lukin waking him up and Barnes remembering Steve on the bridge had been enough to have HYDRA worried.

“Some things.” Barnes admits.

“He’d have come for you.” Tony swears, knowing it to be true. “If he’d have known you’d survived, nothing would have stopped him finding you.”

“I know that now.” Barnes says softly.

“You didn’t before?” Tony asks. Barnes shakes his head, his long hair caught in a light breeze. Tony can’t understand why HYDRA would go so far as to shave him, but not trim his hair.

“I didn’t remember who I was waiting for.” Barnes admits quietly. “Then I remember... I remember- there was a man,” Barnes stutters, paling, “he told me Steve was dead.” If possible, he seems to shrink even further into himself. “He laughed.”

Zola. He’s talking about Zola. Of all the things Tony wishes he could spare Barnes the pain of remembering, Zola’s probably top of the list. What must it have been like for him, to be back at the mercy of a man who had already tortured him twice? To be waiting on the man who had saved you both times, only to be told he was dead? It’s uncomfortable as hell to know more about the situation than Barnes does - to understand his pain in ways he can’t. It’s also incredibly humbling to be in this position of trust.

Just when Tony thinks he can grasp the nature of evil, that he’s seen how cruel and wicked men can be, he finds another rock to overturn and surprise surprise, there’s even worse scum beneath it.

And Howard authorized all this. He let this happen. He *made* this happen. It’s on Tony to fix it, but god, he doesn’t know how.

"I don't want to remember any more." Barnes says, so pained and childlike that Tony can't help but reach out and squeeze the metal hand that is curved over his knee. Barnes flinches, but he doesn't pull away.

"Whatever happens," Tony promises him, "you don't have to face this alone."

"Ya vseгда odeen." Barnes murmurs. He does that a lot, slipping into Russian when he's upset. Tony thinks it is Lukin's influence. At least he switches back to a language Tony understands to say, "I need to get him back."

Tony knows it's not that Barnes doesn't recognize that Natasha and Clint are captives as well. It's just, like always, he can't see beyond Steve's influence.

"We will," Tony looks up to find Sam and Thor standing behind them. Sam looks him up and down critically then turns his eyes on Barnes. "You fit for action?"

"Fitter than you." Tony grins at Barnes' flat, dry response. He'd responded the same way after the choppers had gunned Tony's house in the Hamptons. Under all that trauma and pain there's still a man, still some sense of Bucky Barnes.

"Yeah," Tony laughs, running his hand over his head with a wry grin. "I can believe that."

Barnes stands and offers a hand to Tony - the ultimate sign that he still feels bad for trying to maybe kill him before. Tony accepts it without hesitation and pulls himself to his feet. There's the odd twinge in his ribs, a dull ache in his head, but overall he's firmly converted to the Asgardian Health Care Program. He turns away from the dome to see Thor, Bruce, Sam and a woman Tony can only imagine to be Lady Sif walking towards them.

"I am pleased to see you both looking well." Thor says with a soft smile. He's in full battle dress, and Sam's wearing something similar to Barnes, only in shades of gray and red.

Tony nods. "Don't take this the wrong way, but -"

"It is time to leave." Thor nods. "Perhaps one day you will return and I can show you my home."

"Sure." Tony nods. "Count me in for the full cruise package. But now? Let's hear your plan. You do have a plan, right?" He looks hopefully at Sam. Bruce has emerged from the domed building and joins them, his arms crossed and his expression pinched.

Tony's about to ask him what is wrong when Thor says, "Our enemies are most interested in Bucky, correct?" It sounds funny when Thor says Barnes' name, and he seems to have problems sounding out the letters.

"Please tell me your plan isn't to use him as bait." Tony glares at them. This is what happens when he's unconscious and can't partake in the scheming side of things. People come up with all kinds of stupid shit. Like this. This is the stupidest.

"It's a good plan." Barnes says.

"It's a terrible plan." Tony argues. "A good plan is going in there and breaking everything. A good plan is frying all their asses with that funky hammer of yours," He glares at Thor. "A good plan is--"

"Are you going to let us actually tell you the plan?" Sam asks impatiently.

Tony pauses mid-rant, suspicious. “Yes?”

Sam looks at Bucky. “Arsuf.” He says. Apparently that means something.

Barnes’ eyebrow rises and a very cold smile tugs at the edge of his lips. “Good plan.” He says. “When do we leave?”

“Whenever you are ready.” Thor nods. Barnes straightens his shoulders and turns his gaze to the stars.

“I’m ready.” He says, the tortured, broken man Tony was speaking to only moments ago pushed once more behind a wall of ice and steel.

“Wait,” Tony is lost, “what’s Arsuf? Guys? Details please! Guy? Hey!”

“You’re gonna love it.” Sam says, patting Tony on the back as they follow Thor towards Heimdall.

“I’ll love it even more if you tell me what it is.” Tony protests. “Guys, come on! Really?!” He breaks off and sighs. The fact that they aren’t telling him anything is probably indication enough that he’s not going to love it. Quite the opposite. “Would you pull this shit on Steve?” He whines.

“It’s Steve’s plan.” Sam says, the knowing smile he shoots Tony falling off his face as they come to a stop before a towering man dressed all in gold.

“Christ.” Tony whispers. “We’re gonna die, aren’t we?”

Chapter End Notes

Ya vseгда odeen = I'm always alone

(Quick, someone give Bucky a hug!)

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up for some fairly graphic torture in this part. Also violence, because, well, just because.

So it turns out, Tony does know what Arsuf means. It's famous, actually. Twice over. The first Arsuf, the one that gave it its name, refers to a key battle during the Third Crusade. Steve, who is apparently even more of a nerd than Tony's ever given him credit for being, took inspiration from it for an assault on a HYDRA-held town during the war. That event is now, at least according to Sam, required learning for all soldiers going through Basic training. He fills Tony in on the details as Thor and Barnes converse quietly with Heimdall and Lady Sif. From the way his eyes keep glancing in her direction, Tony's not one hundred percent sure Sam's attention is entirely focused on regaling him with Steve's glory days.

Because sure, now it's been spelled out for him, Tony does remember being told about this plan. 1944, Nazi Germany. Only Howard never called it by its official title when telling the story. No, he called it 'Steve's goddamn fucking reckless, utterly dumbass stupid idea of pure insanity'. Which, if you're going to recreate an iconic battle from history, you might as well go with the one with the catchiest name, right?

The plan itself is relatively simple, and in many ways, Tony was right. They are using Barnes as bait.

In many ways, that's not going to be hard. MI19 are holding Steve, Clint and Natasha at a site still known on the underground as the 'London Cage'. It's as overly dramatic as it sounds, and it's located in possibly the worst place in the world for the Avengers to launch an attack.

Now, Tony does have an apartment in London, technically. He's never been there, preferring to stay in hotels when he's in the city on business, but Pepper likes it, so of course he's not going to sell it. Like a lot of people with a lot of money, Tony's apartment is in the City, east of London central and right on the banks of the Thames. It has incredible views of the London skyline - at least according the brochure, and it's in one of the very top neighborhoods.

Another top neighborhood is the borough of Kensington, and the most exclusive address in the city is the mile long street of Kensington Palace Gardens which is, coincidentally, the location of the London Cage. Say what you like about the Brits, but at least they'll build their secret government torture facilities in a classy area. The average house price on that street is nineteen million a pop.

But it's not so much the houses that are the worry, rather the people who live there.

Right next door to the Cage - and Tony does mean literally next door - is the Russian Embassy. India's delegate on the World Security Council lives in the house on the other side. The street is also home to the Ambassadors of France, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Japan and Finland. The Saudi Royal Family lives four doors down, opposite the Sultan of Brunei, and there are another seven world embassies to choose from, if you were to get bored.

Private security is as heavy as it comes, and the wrong move here is pretty much a guaranteed start

to a war.

So, setting Barnes up on a bench in the private park across the street while Thor goes for a little wander is tantamount to suicide.

But they do it anyway. They need to draw their enemy out, and placing the most wanted man in the world right across the street is as easy a way of doing it as anything.

Tony's so preoccupied on not having heart palpitations that he hardly notices the trip back from Asgard, oblivious to the beauty of the stars until their feet are hitting pavement in the middle of one of the world's most affluent streets.

"Just, try not to step on anyone who has shares in Stark Industries, okay?" Tony sighs.

"Guessing that's everyone?" Sam says, shouldering his rifle. Lady Sif has kitted them all out with weapons - including modified cartridges for the guns Tony and Sam were carrying as well as a truly ungodly amount of sharp objects for Barnes. Bruce is unarmed as per usual, but then he's still the most dangerous man on the street.

"You sure you're up for this?" Tony asks Barnes, who is standing under a blossoming tree with a look of cold blooded murder on his face. It seems strange, looking ahead of them to the beautiful building set back from the road. Some of the most powerful people in the world live on this street. How many of them know what is happening just a few doors down? "Right, right? Just asking. God save the Queen, and good luck, I guess. Speeches aren't really my thing."

"Don't get shot?" Sam suggests.

"Don't start a war?" Bruce adds.

"Don't get in my way." Barnes warns them.

"Christ, you're terrifying." Tony shudders. "Right then. Let's get started."

There are already people approaching them. A group as eclectic as theirs can't just appear on the street out of thin air and not trigger alarms, not in this part of the world. Plus, Tony thinks with dry, wry amusement, their Asgardian garb can hardly be called inconspicuous. Private security forces are amassing in numbers, but none seem keen to make the final move. Tony can't blame them. Caution is a tool of their trade, and they will all be ex-special forces.

They must know why they are there. They must be waiting for something.

Then come the guys they are hoping for. There are several different forces in play here, both private and government, but they can spot MI19 as soon as they arrive on the scene. They are the only ones who are willing to get in close, and in doing so, they open the doors to their building, spilling out on to the street and surrounding the park in a tightly formatted semi-circle.

Probably not the best idea.

As soon as the electric gates slide open, thunder and lightning fill the air as Thor fries the circuitry, leaving the infrastructure of the Cage wide open to them. He's doubled around to the back of the property and, if their plan is going well-- which let's face it, rarely happens-- then he's engaging already.

Bruce, who is almost curious to try out the new clothing that the Asgardians promised faithfully would stretch with him, cocks his head to one side. "Next time we stay in the tower, agreed?"

“Agreed.” Tony nods. “Have fun, buddy.” Bruce grunts in annoyance, and he’s suddenly shifting beside them, smoothly transitioning into the Hulk with a control that only ever happens when the choice to change is his own.

The appearance of the Hulk is the only trigger the security forces need to open fire, but his bulk protects Tony, Sam and Barnes from harm.

Tony glances over at Barnes. This is the first time he’s actually seen the Hulk. “Weird, huh?” He says lightly, trying to forestall any panic that might follow.

Barnes looks back at him steadily. “I’ve seen worse.”

Tony just grins. “Wilson, you ready?”

“Are you kidding me?” Sam is practically vibrating with energy beside them.

“Then fly! Fly my pretty!” Tony takes a second to admire the utterly indignant look Sam shoots him before the wings are unfolding out of his back and he’s taking to the sky.

Turns out that everything they can do, Asgard can do better. Except, annoyingly enough, build an arc reactor. Tony would be proud, if he didn’t so desperately want his suit. Guns were never his thing, which, yes, ironic, given the family business, but true.

The ground rumbles as the Hulk charges forward with a roar, engaging the security forces that are clearly in way over their heads. Tony’s known Bruce to single-handedly flatten armies, so he’s not worried about numbers.

That’s how the plan is supposed to work.

Bruce and Thor engage and contain. Sam provides air support - which he does with both a fearlessness and a skill Tony admires - while Tony and Barnes take the building.

It doesn’t escape him that they have left the most dangerous job to Barnes. Tony’s instincts are at war, telling him not to allow Barnes into the building full of people who will most likely want to put him on a leash, but he can’t argue with the knowledge that if anyone is going to be able to navigate the facility and locate their friends, it’s going to be Barnes.

So with the Hulk providing cover and drawing fire away from them, Tony and Barnes charge onto the site.

It’s a large, multi-leveled building with a front door that is still wide open thanks to Thor. Tony’s much less reticent about shooting anyone who gets in their way than he was before, though he is imagining Pepper’s reaction when this inevitably makes the news. He hates that once again she is going to find out about his latest misadventure from someone else, but he dares not take the time to break away from the plan.

Barnes moves with the same speed and efficiency as ever, and between the two of them they are able to make it inside and into the stairwell quickly.

“Up or...okay, down it is.” Tony shouts, racing after Barnes who doesn’t so much as use the stairs, but vaults over the railings and drops down two levels at a time.

Barnes is so occupied with moving forward that he almost misses the two agents who emerge onto the stairwell from behind them as they pass. He stops two floors down and turns back to engage, but Tony is closer. He punches one of them in the throat and pushes the other down the stairs. He

bounces down to Barnes' position only to take a fatal kick to the head. Barnes doesn't let that stop his momentum and carries on back down the stairs. Tony doesn't want to know how he knows where he is going, only that it pays off when they reach a bank of cells stretched on either side of a large, windowless room.

The cells are empty but for one, and Tony steps over the two dead guards posted outside to peers through the viewing panel. The large window is covered with a one way protective film, so those on the outside can see in, but from the inside the view is blocked. Barnes checks the door, but even with his strength he can't break through what Tony recognizes as a fingerprint access lock, not without attracting a lot of attention and potentially risking the lives of their friends inside.

Natasha's clothes are crusted with blood, a lot more blood than Tony remembers finding on her after the crash; her hair is a wild, tangled mess, matted against the side of her cheek where it's clear she's been struck repeatedly. Her captors have shown no consideration for her broken arm and it is cuffed to the side of the metal chair she is sat in. The whole frame is welded to the ground, and there are further restraints at her ankles. They know exactly who she is and are taking no risks.

From a distance, the sight of her makes Tony's blood boil with rage as every protective instinct he never knew he had comes online. Now he's edged closer though, he can see the fire in her eyes has not diminished at all. If anything, this is the first time he has seen her genuinely furious.

The cause of her anger does little to stop the rise in Tony's blood pressure.

Clint's shirtless, strung up by his wrists several paces away from Natasha, black and blue with bruises and raw, red marks, and for a second Tony's heart stops, because the last time he'd seen Barton, he'd been unconscious and they'd been worried about a neck injury.

He's conscious now, and his head rolls as he is struck in the face, but he raises it a moment later at match Natasha with the force of his glare. That's a good sign, right? Even if it does look like he's been used as a piñata. His relief doesn't last long - one of the agents standing beside him places a picana prod against a black/blue bruise on his ribs and hits him with sixteen thousand volts. Tony's forgotten what it sounds like to hear a man being tortured, but Clint's bloodcurdling scream brings it all back in a flood of cold fear. The high voltage, low power ratio has been designed purely for the purposes of torture, as it lowers the risks of fatality but does nothing to diminish the pain caused.

Tony realizes what is happening quickly enough. They are trying to use Barton to get information out of Natasha. They are torturing him to hurt her.

"-lets try this again, Natalia," There are four men in the room with them. The one leading the interrogation stands just out of arm's length of Natasha's chair. It's on his indication that his colleagues repeat the process. He doesn't pull back until Clint's scream dies in a wordless choke, his body shaking and jerking with pain. "The famous Black Widow is not someone I would have associated with loyalty. Tell me about the Sputnik programme."

She grins at him, bloody and cold, but Tony can see the fear in her eyes is genuine and deep. "Russia's first satellite. It's on Wikipedia."

One of the men besides Clint douses him with water from a hose attached to the wall, and the second presses the prod against his spine. Tony swears that he can hear Clint's scream down to the bone and frantically starts tapping at the computerized lock to the door, working to bypass the identification code.

"Don't be cute, Natalia, it doesn't suit you. Sputnik. I know they trained you. I want names."

“I don’t have any names.” Natasha says, her teeth gritting together and her eyes focused only on Clint as he screams in agony. There’s been little in the way of verbal response from him, and that worries Tony. He looks like hell, and while he’s conscious, he is not particularly coherent. “I can’t tell you anything!”

“You won’t, you mean.”

“Can’t!”

“He needs medical attention, Natalia. I don’t know how much more of this he can take.” They turn the hose on Clint again and he shivers, pained and dripping almost as much blood as he is water. “One name. Just give me one name, and I’ll get him taken upstairs for treatment.”

Natasha’s chest heaves. “They’re dead! They’re all dead! I can’t give you any names!”

“I know that is not true.” The Interrogator says. “And I don’t have time for all this prevaricating. Up the voltage.”

“No!” Natasha struggles against her restraints but she is helpless to stop the agents from cranking up the power. “Please, I swear-”

Clint’s scream breaks in the middle and he slumps over, senseless. The man next to him checks his pulse and nods his head. Natasha starts screaming Russian profanities, still struggling to escape.

“Last chance, Natalia. One might think you actually want him dead.”

“I want to kill him myself.” She snarls, so much hate in her eyes Tony thinks she might be drowning in it.

For a second Tony thinks he’s misheard. He’s not the only one. The men in the room hesitate, look at her, and she grins, bloody and terrifying.

That’s when Tony glances over to Barnes, just to see if maybe he’s missed something.

He has. Barnes isn’t there any more.

And it’s him Natasha is talking to. Tony glances up and grins nastily -- the air vent has been ripped right off the ceiling. Tony’s attention snaps back to the center of the room in time to see Barnes drop down from the ceiling and dispatch of the three other agents. It takes him less than a second for each kill, and none of them have the time to cry out.

It says a lot about how horrific the events are that he has been watching that he completely missed Barnes moving into place. Tony throws caution to the wind and dives into the mess after him, shooting the lock on the door, racing to Barton’s side and fumbling with the locks on his restraints.

“You look like shit.” He tells Barton, hiding the panic he feels at the trembling that is running through Barton’s body. He’s in shock and Tony knows well enough that if they don’t stabilize him soon, Clint’s own body will finish the job of killing him.

“F-fucking tin-can airlines,” Barton groans as Tony releases the catch of one wrist and his body weight hangs entirely from the one arm. Tony quickly moves to brace his weight, compensating for the angle enough to release the last lock. Tony has to support all of his weight, but the sound of his voice might just be the sweetest thing Tony’s ever heard.

“You should sue.” Tony tells him, a giddy sort of relief flooding through his system as he wraps

Clint's arm over his shoulder and helps keep him upright.

"Nat-" His eyes flick around, wide, unfocused and desperate as he searches for Natasha.

"I'm okay, I'm here, we're gonna be fine." Natasha calls across the room. "Barnes, get me the fuck out of here!"

To the Interrogator, Barnes must look like some kind of nightmare come to life. He takes a step back as Barnes stalks towards him. He doesn't engage though, he heads to Natasha and rips the restraints from her with his left hand.

"You got anything sharp?" She asks Barnes, who goes and pulls Tony's goddamn fucking kitchen knife out from beneath the back of his body armor. Thor's given him all kinds of shiny, pointy objects that he has stashed in various holsters and pockets, and Tony is one hundred percent convinced that Barnes is fucking with him right now.

Barnes flips the blade over and passes it to Natasha, who stands upright without a single wince or hesitation and marches in the direction of the Interrogator, who has backed over to the wall and slammed his hand repeatedly on the internal alarm.

"Yeah, I don't think anyone is coming." Tony tells him. "They're a little busy."

"Thor ...Bruce?" Clint asks, groaning and trying desperately to focus as Tony helps him stumble across the room.

"Both."

"Nice."

"Stand the fuck still so I can kill you." Natasha's clutching the knife in her hand and advancing on the Interrogator, who really, should have seen this coming. You don't fuck with Natasha Romanov. And you sure as hell don't hurt the people she loves in her presence.

Barnes says something in a low, quiet drawl - more Russian - and she pauses before responding.

Just what they need: Natasha and Barnes working together and scheming in Russian. "Wait, what did they say?" Tony asks Barton.

Barton tries to shake his head but the movement brings about a low whimper. Christ. He's not capable of answering, and Tony can do little but readjust Clint's weight against his shoulder as Natasha closes in on her prey.

She doesn't move as if she is injured, but Tony has seen her in action and this slow, steady prowl is an indicator of serious hurts. Her arm is almost black with bruises and after two days the break will probably need surgery to fix up. He's sensing that field trip back to Asgard will be coming a lot sooner than anticipated.

Her hand tangles in the Interrogator's hair as she pulls his head up, baring his throat.

The Barnes speaks up again and she pauses. "Make it quick." She says to him. "Killing this asshole is the only thing I've wanted to do all day."

Barnes nods shortly and crouches down so he is level with the Interrogator. "Captain Rogers," He says, "Where is he?"

“Why would I tell you?” Unlike the pilot, this guy looks like he might last at least more than a full minute under the joint attention of Natasha and Barnes.

Sweet Christ, that’s a terrifying thought. The Black Widow and the Winter Soldier working together to scare the shit out of their enemies.

“Because if you do,” Barnes says, his voice soft and surprisingly gentle, “I’ll make sure she kills you quickly.”

“And if I don’t?”

The look in Barnes’ eyes is not a look you’d ever see on the Winter Soldier. It’s in equal parts terrifying and heartbreaking. “You’d be surprised what you can live through.”

The Interrogator seems to dwell this over in his mind. It’s obvious from his reaction to both Natasha and Barnes that he knows exactly who he is dealing with here. Tony’s never really put much thought into it, certainly not with Natasha, but to have the kind of reputations they do? It makes him real glad they are on his side.

“Third floor,” the Interrogator says, his voice level and his posture relaxed. He’s resigned to his fate in a way that the pilot was not. “Second door on the left after you get out of the lift.”

Natasha doesn’t hesitate a second longer before driving the blade slowly into his throat. It’s a lot more messy than watching Barnes snap the pilot’s neck, or even seeing him cut his way through a small army. It’s Natasha’s redaction to it, Tony thinks. It’s the satisfaction in her eyes and the fact that she takes her time.

“Your girlfriend is kinda scary,” Tony whispers to Clint, trying to smile a little.

“Not... girlfriend.” Clint mumbles, barely conscious. Tony’s about to roll his eyes at the silly denial when he catches Clint’s barely there whisper. “Wife...my wife.”

Tony practically drops him in surprise. Way to casually drop that bombshell into the conversation. If anything that makes Natasha’s delight in killing the people who hurt him even more intense. “What?!” He’d flail his arms to emphasize the point if he weren’t the only thing keeping Barton upright. “You’re married.”

“Take him.” Barnes is saying to Natasha. “Get him to safety.”

“Where’s our extraction point?” Natasha hands Barnes back Tony’s knife.

“You were KGB.” Barnes says, looking at her. She nods, and Tony’s not sure how that is relevant until he says, “If you can’t find Thor or the Hulk, head to Bravo Six.”

That must mean something to Natasha, because she nods and hurries over to take Barton’s weight from Tony’s shoulders. “Hey,” she whispers, wrapping his arm over her back. He’s a head taller than she is and does his best to hold his own weight, but his cheek briefly rests against her hair as relief seems to wash over him. “I got you.” She whispers to him.

“S’good.” He murmurs, his voice trailing off as his exhaustion and pain catches up with him.

Barnes takes the door off its hinges and checks the corridor, killing two passing agents before waving them out. “Down to the ground floor.” He tells them. “The front door should be open.”

“Good luck.” Natasha says, “Find Rogers.”

Barnes nods again. "You coming?" He calls to Tony.

"Lead the way," Tony says, following Natasha and Clint's retreating forms down the corridor before jogging to catch up with Barnes, who is already in motion.

After watching Natasha take such pleasure in killing the man who had tortured Clint, Tony can only anticipate the carnage Barnes is going to lay on whoever is with Steve. Apparently he's gotten a whole lot more bloodthirsty in the past week, because he can honestly say he's looking forward to it.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

All praise [the editing queen](#) who really pushed this chapter in the right direction while I was too busy flailing like an idiot because OMG THIS IS IT.

I'm also going to add all the warnings for this part because while previous chapters have been violent (omg, so violent!) this one is probably the most disturbing one yet. Major warnings for physical and psychological abuse both past and present, mental breakdown and torture.

That said, I think this is the chapter most of you have been waiting for! I hope you enjoy it, and I'll be waiting with [tea and kittens](#) if you need me x

EDIT:

There's a small army between them and Steve. Not unexpected, Tony thinks, but he can't help the sinking feeling in his stomach as he and Barnes reach the level they were directed to, quietly sneaking out of the stairwell. They pause, glancing around the corner, and that's when they see the guards posted outside a room that can only be Steve's.

"Exactly how are you planning on dist...no, never mind. Pretend I didn't ask." Tony whispers as he leans back against the wall and shakes his head. He checks the two firearms he has strapped to his Asgardian shoulder holster. "Can I once more reiterate the fact that Steve will kill me, slowly, if I let anything happen to you?"

Barnes meets his gaze head on. "I'll keep them occupied. Just get him out," he says, as if that's the only thing that matters to him. Honestly, they're as neurotically overprotective of each other as you can get. It would be endearing if Tony isn't cast so frequently in the role of the poor bastard who has to break the bad news when one or both of them does something stupid. Last time, Barnes tried to kill him. He doesn't hold up much hope of Steve's reaction being much better.

"Right. Right. Just...please don't die?"

"They're going to have to try harder than this." On the surface, it sounds almost flippant, off handed and glib, like any number of one-liners Tony himself might throw out there. Then he thinks of the number of people who must have tried to kill Barnes over the last seventy years, and it becomes less a joke and more a grim fact.

"My god, our lives are so depressing right now. Okay, you go commit unspeakable acts with my kitchen utensils. I'll go rescue the fair maiden."

Barnes' eyebrow raises, but that's the only response he makes to the comment before he calmly launches himself around the corner and into the path of the highly armed, intensely skittish agents.

This probably wouldn't work if they weren't trying to take him alive, but in seconds they are all distracted enough for Tony to follow in Barnes' wake. He's never seen someone create such carnage in such short a time, but Barnes is nothing if not a stickler for thoroughness and with the

exception of the bodies of those he killed first, the fighting at the end of the corridor keeps the way clear for Tony to sneak into the room where Steve is being held.

He's prepared for all kinds of grisly scenes, especially after seeing what has been done to Natasha and Clint, but by contrast the room is a stark, sterile environment, not unlike a hospital setting. He sees a man in a labcoat and puts a bullet in him on principle. There's a bed against one wall, surrounded by medical equipment. Steve's out cold and cuffed to the frame.

Tony's first, frightened thought is that they've been experimenting on him the way they did with Barnes, but on closer inspection, it actually appears that they have been treating the injuries he sustained in the explosion. The wounds on his head and abdomen are shiny and healing. Whatever they want Steve for, they want him alive and healthy, and, somehow, that manages to be even more sinister. The fact that Steve's still unconscious is most likely due to the constant flow of drugs in his system as opposed to his injuries. Tony knows how fast he heals naturally.

Gunshots crackle behind the door and Tony doesn't have time to second guess himself. He rips the IV out, and he's about to attack the cuffs that keep Steve trapped to the bed when he realizes exactly what they are.

There's probably little that can restrain Steve if he puts all his effort into escaping, but Tony knows the wiring crisscrossing out of the metal bindings. These cuffs carry an electronic charge that triggers whenever they come into physical contact with the frame of the bed. They hurt like a bitch, no doubt, and they'll take considerably more effort to break free from.

Fortunately for Steve, Tony is a genius, and this is kinda his field of expertise. It takes him forty five seconds flat to kill the charges dead, and the metal cuffs unlock just as Steve begins to stir.

"Bucky?" He moans, his eyes not yet opening.

"My god, you're predictable." Tony sighs as a way to hide how really, epically relieved he is to see Steve regaining consciousness. "Alas, it is I, your favorite genius billionaire."

Steve blinks his eyes open. "Tony?"

"You know more than one genius billionaire?" Tony quips, helping Steve struggle to sit upright. He's wearing only cotton pants and a few layers of bandages, but Tony doesn't want to waste time looking around for more proper clothing.

"Bucky?" Steve and Barnes both have one track minds, it's impressive.

"He's okay, he's fine." Tony promises. "Worried about you."

"I'm fine." Steve says, shaking off the drugs with increasing speed as he forces himself to concentrate. His regenerative abilities and his super revved metabolism really are miraculous. "Nat and Clint--"

"We got them out." Tony says soothingly, easing Steve's shoulder over his arm and trying to help him out of the bed. He's considerably heavier than both Barton and Barnes. "Don't worry about them. Let's just go, yes?"

"Where's Bucky?" Steve asks, his knees locking in an attempt to not fall on his face with the first steps he takes.

"Cutting a swath through British Intelligence, I imagine." Tony says dryly.

Predictably, Steve turns a furious scowl on him. "You brought him here? What the hell were you thinking?" Tony knows Steve's anger comes from a place of fear and pain, but it stings none the less.

"I was thinking," he says testily, "that nothing short of strapping him to a nuclear bomb was going to stop him from coming after you. But hey, if you'd rather I'd put a couple of bullets in him, just say so, next time I'll--"

"No, no, I'm sorry." Steve says as they stumble to the door, Tony keeping his gun out and ready -- just in case. "I'm sorry, I just--"

"You and me both, buddy." Tony snorts. "Seriously though, nothing was going to stop him coming for you."

He reads the vulnerability on Steve's face as they stumble together into the corridor. He seems shocked by the number of bodies littering the floor. Knowing that Barnes would stop at nothing to save him - just like old times - must be a bittersweet pill to swallow.

"But see," Tony says as they reach the edges of the carnage Barnes has left behind, "he's just--" Tony is about to say 'fine', because Barnes has been nothing but a powerhouse of death and calculated violence every since they set out to rescue Steve. Tony fully expects him to be standing calmly in the middle of a pile of bodies, just like he did in the tunnel in Northern Ireland.

He's not.

Well, he is standing, but he's not calm, and he's not alone. He's also holding a gun pointed right at Tony and Steve. His stance is steady, but his expression is tormented.

"Bucky?" Steve's voice shakes and his expression twists with anguish.

Behind him, Aleksander Lukin stands, the master of his marionette. He has his hand pressed on Barnes' shoulder and speaks to him in a soft, enticing voice. "Kill them," he says, "kill them and end this."

And Tony feels incredibly stupid, because Lukin is the reason they were flying to London in the first place. Somehow between all that had happened, Tony never stopped to think that he could have been involved with MI19, he's been too preoccupied with thinking of him as the symbol of HYDRA's evil. He's still not sure what the connection is - what they wanted Steve for, or whether Lukin knew or approved of the plan to bomb them out of the sky. Tony startles as Steve maneuvers himself forward, so he is protecting Tony from the direct line of fire. "Bucky, don't do this." Steve begs him. "This isn't you."

"You have no idea who he is, Captain Rogers," Lukin says, addressing Steve for the first time. "Or what he is capable of. You have no idea what he has done for HYDRA, for the world."

"You're not their weapon, Bucky. They don't own you." Steve continues, speaking to Barnes directly instead of simply talking at and about him like Lukin does.

Barnes' hand starts to tremble.

"Kill them." Lukin orders again. "Do it now."

Barnes' eyes fill with panicked tears. The hand holding the gun is trembling so badly now Tony doubts he'd hit the broadside of a barn.

Steve takes a hesitant step forwards. “Bucky, please,” he whispers, reaching out towards him.

That cracks something in him, and Barnes folds like a house of cards, a pained, fearful cry escaping his throat as he drops to his knees at Lukin’s feet. He bows his neck and clutches at his head, whimpering in pain.

Barnes, who has shown no indication of fear or pain this entire time, who has killed with ruthless efficiency and whose very presence has reduced men to terror...

He’s kneeling on the ground, smaller than a man his size has any right to try and be, his hands clutching at his head and his whole body shaking as he hyperventilates.

Steve goes utterly rigid, and the low growl at reverberates in his throat is not a sound Tony would ever have imagined that sweet natured, Steve Rogers could ever make. It’s terrifying to realize that the bloodshed Barnes has caused in his search for Steve is nothing compared to what Steve wants to do to those who hurt Barnes.

“You son of a-“

“I would not advise you to come any closer.” Lukin says, diverting his attention from Barnes to fix them both with a cold, cruel sneer.

“Steve!” Tony hisses, putting his hand on Steve’s chest to still his forward momentum. It does little more than divert Steve’s attention, and he follows Tony’s gaze to where Lukin is gently stroking back Barnes’ tangled hair - and the syringe resting against his neck.

Lukin ignores them, but Barnes hears, Tony’s sure of it. Barnes’s head jerks minutely, an aborted motion as if he wants to look up at them, but knows that he won’t be allowed. His shoulders heave as his ragged breathing turns into a choked, terrified sob.

Tony doesn’t know what to do. They don’t know what’s in the syringe, or if even Steve can make it to them before it’s injected into Barnes’ spine. Tony keeps his gun trained on Lukin, but he’s too afraid to shoot, both because he knows he’s not the world’s greatest shot, and because he’s afraid of Barnes’ reaction given the way he’s behaving right now.

“It hurts, I know.” They can just about make out Lukin’s gentle voice as he folds himself over Barnes’ trembling form. Interestingly though, he never gets down on Barnes’ level. He maintains his stance, and his dominant position. “But it is of your own making. Disobedience is always followed by pain, you should know that by now. Come home, Petrushka. It doesn’t have to be like this. I can take the pain away, you know I can. I do not take pleasure in your suffering. Not like they do.”

Tony’s sure the only reason Lukin hasn’t already injected Barnes with the contents of the syringe is one of practicality. Right now Barnes is both his weapon and his shield, and if he is unconscious - or worse - Lukin will be on his own with a dead weight body to maneuver. Against Steve, that results in some unfavorable odds.

Barnes whimpers, and to Tony’s shock, curls one of his arms around Lukin’s calf. He makes himself even smaller, and he uncurls the hand that was ineffectively blocking Lukin from injecting the syringe into his spine. He’s giving in.

It feels like someone has sucked all the air out of Tony’s chest. He’d thought...he’d hoped...

It was too good to be true. It was too much to ask for. But Barnes had been lucid in Asgard, he’d been focused and mission orientated, and it had seemed like maybe they could do this - that if they

found Steve then Barnes would be okay. They could help him.

But the true horror of the last seventy years of Barnes' existence can be summed up in the hesitant little nod of Barnes' head. He's not going to fight it when Lukin injects him. He's not going to fight it when they take him back to be wiped. He's in so much pain that the idea of a blank, deadened state seems like a relief.

This is the man who has expressed a desire for only two things since Tony has met him - Steve, and not to be returned to HYDRA's clutches. This is the man who, without fear or hesitation, throws himself into harms way over and over and over again.

And now he clutches at the leg of his tormenter, reduced to a scared, helpless child. Beneath that Asgardian armor and his cold focus, Barnes had almost looked whole, but Lukin has stripped all that away and revealed the truly broken man beneath.

Steve is practically vibrating with the urge for violence and Tony is suddenly deathly afraid of how this will go. It's sickening, to see Lukin be so gentle and soft with Barnes when he's the very reason Barnes is in such pain in the first place.

"Bucky," when he speaks, Steve surprises Tony. He's not soothing or cajoling, and his anger at Lukin is in no way evident in his voice. Instead he sounds so calm, so in control. "It's me. It's Steve."

Barnes sobs harder and rocks back and forth, one arm still curled around Lukin's leg, the other wrapped around himself in a sad mockery of self-comfort. He's not at war with his memories, Tony realizes, but with his conditioning. Lukin has managed to do what no amount of torture and pain could - he's broken Barnes entirely, and he's done so with false kindness. How utterly starved for gentle words must Barnes have been before Lukin came into his life? How desperate for a touch that wasn't followed by pain?

It's an insidious, wicked manipulation, and one that has done as much, if not more, damage than the initial abuse. Tony has a little experience of his own to draw upon and he can't fault Barnes at all for the fact that he makes no move to extract himself from the hand that is twisted in his hair.

"Bucky, I need you to listen to me," Steve says, his voice firm and commanding, but his eyes terrified.

"That isn't your name." Lukin says to Barnes, his gaze turned up to Steve with a cold kind of challenge. He doesn't seem afraid of the two furious men who stand only feet away from him, but then why would he? He's emotionally violated and indoctrinated Barnes to such an extent that it's most likely impossible for Barnes to allow any harm to befall Lukin, either from his own hands or others. "You aren't the man he wants you to be."

"He knows me." Barnes chokes, then flinches, afraid of being punished for speaking up. "He-"

"I do know you," Steve agrees, taking a slow, cautious step forward. There's a distinct, familiar roar filtering through the blaring alarms and the gunshots still raging outside, and Tony has no idea if they're winning or losing. Are those footsteps he hears in the distance? How many agents could they have called for backup? Tony edges a little to the side, trying to see beyond the stairwell and keep his gun trained on Lukin as Steve takes one more step, his voice tight. "I know you. *You* know you. Your name is James Barnes, and I've loved you since we were twelve years old. I need you to get away from him. Please, Bucky..."

"He's lying to you, Petrushka. He wants to manipulate you. He only wants to hurt you." Lukin says

to Barnes, who is getting more and more distressed. “He will cause you such pain. Even the sound of his voice has you in agony.”

Barnes rocks back and sobs Steve’s name. It’s hopeful and scared and desperate, so afraid, so lost. It’s everything James Barnes has been forced to endure expressed in that one, agonizing word. It’s proof that Lukin is not winning this fight.

Steve can sense it as well because he moves forwards, consequences be damned. “Bucky, look at me! Look at me! It’s me, it’s Steve!”

And this time it breaks through the shell of Barnes’ conditioning. He turns, his face a picture of confusion as he looks around and sees Steve. Then, god, then he actually fucking smiles, small and relieved and broken. “Steve?”

Then everything seems to happen at once. Lukin makes a lurch forwards, ready to inject Barnes with the syringe. Barnes, who now has his back to Lukin and his whole focus fixed on Steve, doesn’t see it coming.

“Bucky, move!” Steve is only feet away now, so close, and Barnes moves on instinct, obeying the order from the one commanding officer he would follow into death. He scrambles forwards and collides with Steve, who wraps both his arms around Barnes to support him.

Like a flipped switch, Barnes keens and tangles himself around Steve, all training and focus out of the window. It makes it all but impossible for Steve to do anything other than hold him back and drag him away from Lukin, who is forced to pull back when Tony remembers his gun and fires around in his direction. He thinks he hits his target, but before he can really tell, a bullet drags a path of blazing pain across his arm. He shouts on instinct, ducking low as a second ping over his head.

All he can think about is that Steve is unarmed and Barnes is in no shape to protect either of them. It’s on him.

Tony drops, rolling over on his injured shoulder before coming back to his feet and turning, firing three shots into the head of the one agent who has managed to escape Barnes’ earlier spree and pop up behind them.

He falls like a led brick and, threat eliminated, Tony turns back to Lukin.

He’s nowhere to be seen.

Tony knows he could pursue, he could try and hunt him down...but then he’d be leaving Steve and Barnes with no protection and no one to watch their backs.

Tony turns, helpless, back to his friends.

Steve’s on his knees, both arms wrapped around Barnes, who has completely broken down, either because he has Steve back, or because of Lukin’s attempts to manipulate him, Tony isn’t sure. All he knows is that while Barnes is like this, Steve is no use to anyone.

“I’m okay,” he whispers into Barnes’ hair, “it’s alright, I got you.”

Barnes’ fingers, human and metal, leave bruises on Steve’s bare arms, and they paint such a heartbreaking picture - Steve in only thin cotton pants, his chest and feet bare, still somehow stronger and less vulnerable than Barnes, who is covered from head to toe in impenetrable armor.

He's whispering Steve's name like a prayer, over and over like it's the only thing he can remember.

They should go. They need to get out of here before more agents - or worse - arrive. They need to hunt down Lukin, they need to get Barton medical treatment, and Barnes as far away from here as possible.

But...

"It's okay," Steve whispers, "I will never let him hurt you again."

Barnes whines softly, then, without warning, lifts his head and presses his lips against Steve's.

It must be the most awkward kiss in history - Steve's eyes are wide and shocked, and Barnes probably doesn't even remember *how* to kiss someone, but from where Tony's standing it's one of the sweetest gestures he's seen in his life. Maybe it's knowing the history there - the struggles and the pain they have both endured without hope of ever having more. Maybe he's turning into a romantic in his old age. Either way, when Steve gently pulls away, Tony's all but set to start screaming.

"Bucky," Steve breathes, his hands framing Barnes' face.

Tony can't see Barnes' expression, but his voice is so colored by emotion that it's not hard to imagine it. "I-I...." He stutters in confusion.

There's a fraction of a second when Tony thinks that maybe Steve is going to say nothing, to carry on like there was never anything more between them than brotherly affection, then he's leaning back in and kissing Barnes again. It's a proper kiss this time, gentle, but with a century of feeling behind it - as much desperation as there is hope and so much love Steve practically shines with it.

Tony stares for a moment, because this is all he's wanted for them right from the minute he knew the depths of their feelings...but--

"Can we please have less kissing and more running the fuck away from here?!" He yells, slightly hysterical, because they are not going to start making out surrounded by dead bodies while half the damn country tries to kill them. Okay, so they probably *aren't* going to start making out, period, but still.

Steve smiles, soft and gentle, then kisses Barnes chastely on the forehead. "We'll talk." He promises. "Later, okay?" Barnes hesitates so Steve kisses him again, this time even softer. "Okay?"

"Can we go now?" Tony says, feeling guilty for breaking up their moment, but not enough for it to actually stop him. They'll thank him when they don't get shot. Again. Motherfuck, but his arm stings like a bitch.

Steve looks up, almost surprised to see Tony is still standing there. "Right. What's our extraction plan?" He says, climbing to his feet and pulling Barnes up with him.

"Well, we've got the Thunder god, the man bird or the angry green guy, take your pick." Tony shrugs, pressing down on the bleeding.

Barnes' head jerks around to the side. "Incoming." He says.

"How many?" Steve asks grimly.

Barnes pauses, then says, "Twenty five."

“Plan D, then.” Steve says, grabbing Tony by the one arm that isn’t wrapped around Barnes. “Grab my shield.” Steve tells him, indicating the shield that has been resting abandoned on the floor by Barnes’ feet. Tony does as he is told on instinct. Then he realizes that he’s going to need it. Big time.

“Wait, what? There is no plan D!” He yelps. “Rogers! There is no plan D!” Which doesn’t explain why he’s being half dragged, half carried to the window at the far end of the hallway with increasing speed. “Don’t you fucking dare!” Tony yelps, trying with no luck to extract himself from the arm that holds like a steel band around his ribs. Dear Christ, but Steve is strong.

Barnes isn’t protesting, or struggling, or doing anything to suggest he doesn’t want to be thrown out of a window. This is probably the least insane thing he’s done on Steve’s orders.

“I hate you!” Tony yells at Steve, automatically bring the shield up to protect himself, and a second later they hit the glass, tumbling out into the air and hurtling towards the street below.

Chapter 23

Clearly Steve has a thing about doors. And stairs. And accepting gravity as a thing he needs to take into consideration.

Tony is protected by the shield as they crash through the glass, and three floors down, Steve takes the entire impact of both his and Barnes' weight, his legs braced and his balance far better than a man who has been drugged for two days straight has any right to have.

They crash-land into what can only be described as a full-fledged battle, and Tony looks up, right down the barrel of a gun aiming at his head. He waits for it to fire, almost sees the bullet leaving the chamber and spiraling down the barrel, out into the open air and hurtling towards him.

It never reaches its target. There's a tremble through the ground, then the Hulk is standing between them and the weapons, bullets pinging off his skin, nothing more than ineffectual annoyances. The big guy looks over his shoulder at them, takes one look at Tony's bleeding arm, Steve's bandaged chest and the way Barnes clings to him, and turns back to what is left of the security, roaring in outrage.

Tony looks around for the others. He hopes Natasha and Clint are safe and quickly spots her red hair. They are with Thor, who has circled around to join in the main fighting and is now accompanied by his four Asgardian friends who seem to be having far more fun than is decent.

"We need an exit!" Steve yells as more vehicles pull up to join the fighting. Tony can hear the whirl of propellers in the sky and he knows this is going to end messily if they don't find a way out of here soon. It's one thing for them to create havoc while defending the city from aliens, it's something else entirely to actually start a diplomatic crisis and the news crews can only be so far out. There are people on the edges of the park with the phones out, recording every second of the carnage. Tony's lawyers are going to have kittens when they get wind of it.

Tony grunts then gasps as a huge green arm suddenly wraps around him. He, Steve and Barnes are hefted up like stuffed toys as the Hulk bounds across the grounds to join Thor and the others.

Sam appears out of the sky, his wings tucking in as he rolls on the ground and bounds back up to meet them. Lady Sif grabs him around the waist. "Don't get any ideas." She tells him sternly.

"I, what?" Sam stutters, "oh god, not again. Rogers, I'm glad you're not dead you asshole, but I did not sign up for this!"

"For what?" Steve struggles to speak from under the Hulk's arm. Hogun and Volstagg have stopped cutting their way through agents and appear at the Hulk's side.

"Well now you are an interesting fellow, aren't you?" Volstagg says merrily.

"Please don't try and crush us. I just polished my armor." Hogun adds as they both grab a hold of the Hulk, one on either side. They must make an odd picture: the Hulk hugging Tony, Steve and Barnes, while two Asgardian warriors hold on to his elbows.

Thor reaches them, Clint over his shoulder and Natasha leaning heavily on his other side.

"Heimdall!" He shouts.

"I will not pass out this time," Tony tells himself firmly as they are jerked up into the vastness of space. It's even harder to take stock of what is happening from beneath the Hulk's arm, so he just

clings on for the ride, opening his eyes when they hit solid ground.

Heimdall is waiting for them, a decidedly unimpressed look in his fathomless eyes as he takes in their slightly singed appearance. His gaze lingers for a moment on the Hulk, who's giddy expression is closer to Bruce than anything Tony's ever seen on him, then shakes his head.

"You're a real handy guy to know, you know?" Tony tells him breathlessly. "Like, deus ex Heimdall. It's great."

"We agreed, your highness, that you would stop calling on me to get you and your mortals out of trouble simply because you failed to consider a viable alternative." Heimdall says with an edge of scolding in his voice.

Thor only looks mildly contrite. "Forgive me, old friend. This is the last time, I swear it."

"You've said that before." Heimdall points out. "Your father does not approve."

"Then it is my luck that father isn't here." Thor says with a slightly roguish grin.

Heimdall doesn't dignify the remark with a response. Instead he says, "They look even worse this time."

"I'm still conscious." Tony pipes up helpfully, squirming in the Hulk's grasp. He can feel the arm around him grow smaller ever so slowly as Bruce starts to calm down.

"Congratulations." Heimdall tells him sardonically.

"Space travel." Steve mutters from the Hulk's other side. "I'd say this beats Nazi robots, hey Buck?" But Barnes is still clinging to Steve's arm, his eyes wide and afraid. The encounter with Lukin has done so much damage to his progress it physically hurts Tony to see it.

"I don't think we're in Kansas any more, Toto." Natasha says to Clint, looking up to where Thor carries him carefully as she wavers on her feet.

"I have not been to Kansas," Thor remarks, wrapping his arm more firmly around her waist, "I hear it is very flat."

"How do you fools get anything done?" Lady Sif asks, pushing a dazed Sam up on to his feet and fixing them all with an unimpressed scowl. "My prince, perhaps your friends would benefit from medical attention?" It's less a question than a shove in the right direction.

"Indeed!" Thor says, lifting Natasha with the one arm, Clint still unconscious over the other. Carrying their combined weight seems to cause him little trouble.

Speaking of, "You can put us down now, buddy." Tony tells the Hulk, who growls in response and reluctantly sets them on the Bifrost.

Thor, Sif and Sam make swiftly for the palace with their injured friends, leaving the rest of them behind as they wait for Bruce to slowly calm himself. It takes him a good ten minutes, most of which Tony spends staring out into the vastness of space while Steve and Barnes are led away by Fandral for some privacy.

By the time Bruce comes back to himself, it is just Tony, Hogun and Volstagg out on the shimmering bridge.

Tony flashes him a smile as he raises his head, hair damp with sweat. “Guess who’s back in Oz?” He says, waving an arm around to indicate Asgard.

“Convenient.” Bruce groans, rising to his feet. “Wish I’d had a god on speed dial when the army was after me.”

“I think he’s about to have his user privileges revoked.” Tony says, “And look at you, all not naked and everything.”

Bruce looks down in surprise at the pants that have done as the Asgardians promised and stretched to accommodate his change.

“Huh. That’s pretty cool. Gold star for the Asgardian Science Programme.”

“I can introduce you to their inventor, if it would please you?” Volstagg offers cheerfully. “He would be most interested to catalogue the results after their first foray into battle.”

The prospect of an up and close, personal look of Asgardian science is too much for Bruce to handle. He glances sheepishly at Tony who grins and nods. “Go, be all learned. I’m gonna hang out here with Mr Grumpy.” He jerks his thumb in Heimdall’s direction. They can just about hear his huff of annoyance.

This is the lightest he’s ever seen Bruce after the change and Tony’s not going to jeopardise that with his melancholic train of thoughts. He’s just going to sit here and look at space - actual fucking space - and think for a bit.

And if a bit becomes an hour, two, six, well, he’s not keeping track.

“She is well.” Heimdall says, after Tony has been out there so long his head and brain is almost as numb as his ass. “Your beloved.”

Tony jerks in surprise. “Huh?”

“Your ‘Pepper Potts’.” Heimdall says, as if he can’t quite get his head around human nicknames. “She is well.”

“She’s gonna skin me alive.” Tony says wryly.

“That also.” Heimdall agrees.

“Bucket of sunshine, aren’t you?”

Heimdall does not answer. Not for a long time.

Eventually, Tony rises. He should check on the others. He should get his arm treated. Truth is it doesn’t really hurt any more. Just a flesh wound. So much less damage than what is under the surface.

He’s half way out of the domed building when Heimdall calls after him. “Hiding the truth does not change the reality of it.” He calls. “Better to face it head on.”

“Er. Right.” Tony says awkwardly, “I’ll take that into consideration.”

He knows exactly what Heimdall is talking about. He doesn’t want to think about it. He’s never going to be ready for that conversation. Never.

After checking with one of the palace staff, who lets him know that Thor is in conference with his father's advisors - no doubt getting his ass handed to him for bringing home yet more pet mortals - and that Sam is with the Lady Sif touring the amory - he's not entirely sure if that's a euphemism or not - Tony learns that Clint is in the same room Tony had woken up in, so it's easy enough to find him, even if the floor plan of the palace is something only a crazy person would approve before building.

He ignores the two enormous Asgardian guards posted outside and knocks once, because he does have manners, no matter what the world believes, then slips inside.

He almost backs out again. Clint's shirtless under the sheets, the indications of his torture healing well under Asgardian care - bruises less vivid, cuts less angry. He looks tired, worn out and sore, but far less so than he had before they arrived.

But it's Natasha who gives Tony the reason to contemplate a retreat. She's laid out on the bed above the sheets, her face tucked into the curve of Clint's shoulder and her splinted wrist resting lightly on his chest. She, unlike Barton, is fast asleep. Tony knows better than to intrude on her space.

But Clint flashes him a wry, slightly pained grin and waves him over with the hand that isn't idly stroking Natasha's hair. "Hey," he says, voice soft, "heard you got shot. Congratulations."

Tony hesitates for a second, not sure if he should be leaving them in peace, then Natasha's eyes open. She blinks tiredly at Tony, then curls herself closer into Clint's embrace and drifts back off to sleep almost instantly. Tony can only stare, knowing full well that he's just been given the highest mark of trust imaginable. Natasha Romanov trusts him to be in a room with her while she is sleeping. She trusts him to be in a room with *Clint* while she is sleeping.

He slips into the chair Bruce had previously occupied when Tony and Clint's positions had been reversed and flashes Barton a wry grin. "Does this make me a fully fledged member of the club?" He asks.

"I'll put your case forward for approval." Barton grins and the cut on his cheek pulls lightly against the stitches. "Seriously though, you okay?"

Tony starts and looks at his arm. "Huh? Oh yeah."

"Not what I was talking about." Clint says seriously. His eyes dart over to Natasha and his arm tightens around her. Tony has no clue how they do what they do. How would he be able to function if he knew Pepper was constantly in the kind of danger Natasha is? He wouldn't. Simple as that. Clint Barton is a stronger man than he'll ever be.

"I'm not the one who spent two days in Hotel Guantanamo." Tony points out.

Clint's smile turns crooked. "Been to Guantanamo," he says, "this is nothing."

"I love that you think that's in any way reassuring." Tony huffs. "How did it get to the point where I'm the sane person in the room?"

"Stop deflecting, Stark." Clint says, his smile easy and the shadows in his eyes dark. This is what they all do. They pretend they are okay until they can't do it any more. At least now they have someone to fall back on, they all do.

"I'm okay." Tony shrugs. And it's not entirely a lie. He's so much better than he was before they were all back together. "You know, band reunion, no one died, we didn't start a war, big win I'd

say.”

“How’s Cap holding up?” Clint asks.

“Better than you,” Tony points out. “They weren’t torturing him.”

“No,” Clint agrees. “They were gonna trade him to HYDRA for the plans to their brainwashing device. Needed him in one piece. Nat and I were just an added bonus.”

Tony shudders, both at the nonchalant way Clint looks at his experience with MI19 and the idea of those machines mass produced. The potential threat there is huge. They need to put a stop to HYDRA and they need to do it quickly. Lukin must’ve been there to oversee the transfer, although Tony knows he had a much more sinister reason. Lukin knew Barnes would come for Steve. He’d probably made the deal with MI19 knowing full well he was using them to bait his trap. Tony’s hate for him intensifies.

“What’s Sputnik?” He asks curiously, “That’s what they were asking you guys about, right? They talked about Nat being trained by them?”

Clint’s eyebrow raises. “How do you not know what Sputnik is?”

“Um, not a spy?” Tony says, slightly offended.

“Yeah, but it’s all over Nat’s file...her now publicly accessible file.”

Tony squirms a little. “Yes. Well. I haven’t read it.”

Clint stares at him. “You haven’t read it.” He echoes. “You haven’t read it. I’d have thought you’d be all over it!”

“I was!” Tony protests, “the SHIELD/HYDRA stuff, anyway. I read all that. And said ‘I told you so’. Loudly.”

“But not Nat’s file?” Clint just looks confused now and Tony really wants to not be having this conversation.

“Not any of your personal files.” He says irritably. “Not my place. I figure you want me to know what’s in em, you’ll tell me.”

“Who are you and what have you done with Tony Stark?”

“Cute, Barton. Real witty.” Tony glares at him. He means it though. Natasha and certainly Clint have been outed on a public forum with no mercy. Tony can’t do much to help with that, but he can respect their privacy when it comes to the personal stuff. “So seriously? Sputnik?”

“You can ask Nat that one,” Clint says, “if you’re so invested in respecting our privacy.”

“Fine, whatever.” Tony says, waving the soft, amused smile Clint is shooting him away like he can pretend it doesn’t exist. “They seemed pretty angsty about it, to torture you like that...” he shakes off the memory of Clint hanging there, screaming.

“Wasn’t really about Sputnik I don’t think.” Clint sighs, looking down at Natasha. “The both of us have come into contact with their agents in the past. They didn’t come out of it so great. I mean, even they’ve got paperwork to file on this shit, so they needed some official reason but I’m pretty sure it was just an excuse.”

“To torture you.” Tony feels sick.

Clint doesn't look half as troubled by it as he should. “Job like ours, you don't make many friends. This ain't the first time this has happened. Probably won't be the last, either.”

“I absolutely refuse to believe that.” Tony says firmly. “You have friends now. Powerful friends. Powerful friends who get very unpleasant when they are angry. You also have Bruce, who I'm told is a hair puller, so no. This is not happening again. Not ever.”

“You're a fucking idiot, Stark,” Clint says, his grin bright and his eyes warm, a little of the dark shadows hanging around the corners fading away. “But we'll see.”

Tony huffs. We'll see indeed. He's never ever letting anything like this happen again.

They lapse into silence as Tony stewes maniacally on all the ways he's going to dismember anyone who tries hurting these people when he pauses, overwhelmed by the sheer number of assholes he's going to need to kill just to make that possible. This could take some time.

Then he thinks, “Hey, you speak Russian, right?” He knows he's heard Clint and Natasha whispering together in her mother tongue. It's actually pretty impressive, the number of languages they cover between them all. Natasha speaks six that he knows of, and Clint roughly the same. Bruce can speak Spanish, Cantonese and Mandarin fluently, Pepper adds Japanese to the list, Steve knows French, German and Polish although he admits he's rusty in all three. The only language Tony's ever really embraced is math.

“Why?” Clint frowns.

“Petrushka means what, exactly?”

“Parsley.” Barton says, his eyebrow climbing at what he clearly sees as a very odd question. That...is not the answer Tony was expecting. He's half expected some horrible, saccharine nickname, what with the way Lukin so obviously infantilizes Barnes, but even he can't see how parsley is remotely fitting.

“Huh. Maybe I remembered it wrong.” Tony shakes his head. The name has been troubling him ever since it happened. HYDRA went to such lengths to strip away his identity, to reduce him to something that didn't even recognize his own humanity, and then Lukin comes along and gives him a name. Maybe he's reading too much into it. Maybe it isn't anything more than Lukin manipulating his way past Barnes' broken mind by giving him something Barnes should never have needed. Maybe that's all it is.

“Unless you mean the character?” Barton says, frowning in remembrance. “Petrushka's a Russian folk icon.”

“Really?” Tony asks, leaning forward curiously.

“Hmm. There's a ballet about him. Nat took me when we were in Moscow. Why?” So Natasha is a ballet fan. Tony makes a mental note to hook them both up with tickets for the National when they get back home.

“It's nothing.” Tony says, sitting back in his chair. “Just something Lukin called Barnes.”

Clint's eyes suddenly harden with anger. “Wait, Lukin was there? I missed that?”

“Oh yeah, you missed all the sociopathic creepiness,” Tony says, filling Clint in quickly on

everything that had happened from the moment Tony and Barnes left him and Natasha to their less than graceful exit of the building.

His expression grows considerably more outraged with every passing moment. “And that’s what Lukin called him? Petrushka?”

Unease curls in Tony’s gut. He doesn’t like the way Clint suddenly looks so furious. Natasha stirs against him, disturbed by the sudden tension in his body. Tony can visibly see Clint force himself to relax as he kisses her head and strokes her hair soothingly.

“I’m guessing I’m not gonna like it.” Tony says, already resigned.

Clint laughs bitterly. “No shit. Petrushka’s a puppet. A marionette. In the ballet, he’s brought out to entertain the crowds, but kept locked in a dark cell when he’s not performing.”

Tony stares at him for a full minute. “I...wow... I. I got nothing.” How cruel, how sick, must a person be to take advantage of someone else’s helplessness with such a mockery?

“Guessing he’s not dead yet then?” Barton says, reading the bewildered outrage on Tony’s face. Tony shakes his head. “I vote we do something about that.”

Tony nods mutely. It takes him a minute to gather his thoughts. “I should-“

“Go check on them.” Barton nods, smiling a little. “Say ‘hi’ from me.”

“And me.” Natasha murmurs, her eyes still closed. Tony can’t help but grin back at them as he leaves.

“Will do. Now, is it Mr Romanov or Mrs Barton?”

He ducks the pillow lobbed at his head. Natasha moves fast for a woman who is half asleep. It’s probably the only reason she threw eiderdown instead of something sharp. “Goodbye, Tony.” She says, sounding more awake now.

Tony chuckles and starts to close the door just as he hears her say, “I can’t believe you told him.”

He barely catches Barton’s response of “Hey, I was delirious!” as the door clicks shut.

Tony takes his time heading towards the room he was told Steve - and by association, Barnes - have been allocated. When he reaches the doors, he ignores the guards again and knocks, but doesn’t just barge in. When he gets no answer, he knocks again, slightly harder, and when that also goes unanswered, he throws caution to the wind and lets himself inside.

The room is even bigger than the one Clint and Tony had been given, but this one seems to be designed more for comfort and relaxation than healing. He waves back the guards who follow, concerned by the lack of answer, and walks through a large antechamber before reaching the main bedroom. Then it becomes fairly clear why no one came to the door.

Barnes is fast asleep in the middle of the enormous bed, his breathing slow and steady, and a clear indicator that Thor has once again worked that magic touch of his. He hasn’t stirred at Tony’s entrance, which says everything about how deep he’s under. The heavy armor Thor provided has been removed, leaving him barechested beneath the sheets. He’s curled on his side, metal arm wrapped protectively over his chest.

There’s movement on the balcony as Steve, wearing loose robes of blue and gray, appears,

attracted by the sound of Tony's arrival. The tension in his shoulders drains when he sees who his visitor is. "Hey," he says, running a hand through his hair. It's shorter than when they were fighting aliens in New York, a more modern style than the one he'd sported throughout the war and into his first year of adjustment. "You okay?"

"Just checking up on my favorite geriatrics." Tony says easily. "How's he doing?"

Steve follows his gaze over to the bed. "Not great," he says, his eyes sad. He nods his head in the direction of the balcony and Tony follows him out. Now they have a little more privacy, it feels less like they are talking about Barnes like his presence doesn't matter. "He was pretty agitated."

"It's understandable. He wasn't expecting to get blindsided like that." Tony still kicks himself for not figuring out that Lukin would have been there. "What about you?"

"I'm fine," Steve says, "They kept me out of it the whole time." He leans against the balcony rail and looks out across the city. "He'd have loved this, you know."

"Asgard?" Tony asks, turning so he can see all the things Steve is seeing. "It's pretty amazing."

"He was a sci-fi junkie," Steve says, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a smile. "Used to come back with these dime store books by Campbell and short stories by Asimov."

"Ah, the pulp age of the genre," Tony sighs. Of course Barnes missed out on all the good stuff that came in the 50s and 60s. He makes a note to have a few collections delivered. "That surprises me though."

"What?" Steve asks, leaning on his elbows. "That he liked sci-fi?"

"I dunno," Tony shrugs, "Stories my dad used to tell me, they never really painted Barnes as a bookish kinda guy."

"Yeah, they never really got on so great." Steve chuckles, "and Bucky got on with pretty much everyone. But he was smart." Steve says. "Real smart. Top of our class, but real popular, not like me." It's actually adorable, how obvious Steve is with his adoration. How the hell had anyone missed it back then? How did *Barnes* miss it?

"Let me guess," he teases, "Captain of the football team as well?" Steve says nothing. "Seriously? Oh Rogers, that's too cute."

"Shut up," Steve says, but it's entirely without heat. "Everyone used to say he was Captain America's loyal sidekick, and he'd just grin and tell 'em that someone needed to keep my ass in line but... it was the other way around, you know?" Steve looks up at Tony through damp lashes. "He was smart, he was popular, he was handsome, everyone wanted to be his friend and he...he picked me."

"Seems like the guy was a good judge of character." Tony says, surprising himself with his sincerity.

Steve's answering smile is shy and a little embarrassed. "I wish you could have met him. Before the war, I mean. It changed him a lot, made him harder. He was only there because of me."

"I don't think you're responsible for sending the guy to war, Steve. Let's put that on Hitler, yes?" Tony says seriously. He's never met anyone who can shoulder as much blame as Steve tries to.

"No," Steve shakes his head, "I am. He got called up in the first draft. If he'd have left when most

of the others did in October, then he'd have been out before Pearl Harbor."

"But you got sick, so he stayed, because he could afford your meds and it's all your fault, right?" Tony says, not pulling any punches. "You ever think that maybe he wanted to stay in the Army? That it wasn't just about you? Take it from someone who has been there - hoarding guilt gets you nowhere." Tony says, knowing far too well the weight it comes with.

"He wanted to be a pianist." Steve says miserably.

"And I wanted to be Paddington Bear." Tony says, "Well, him or the Velveteen Rabbit...after... before your time. My point is, we don't always end up doing what we think we will. So he ended up on a different path...doesn't mean he was unhappy there."

"Maybe." Steve sighs. "I don't know, I just--"

"It's okay to not have the answers, you know." Tony says gently. "But hey, that was some kiss. That's good, right?"

Steve doesn't actually turn pink, but it's a close thing. "I think so?" He says, hesitantly. "I know we need to talk. I can't imagine...this wasn't how I thought it would be, you know?"

"In a secret government torture cell surrounded by dead bodies?" Tony muses, "I'm shocked, that's exactly how I imagined my first kiss with Pepper."

Steve actually laughs, which Tony takes as a win. "No, you know what I mean. I wanted this for so long and...how am I even supposed to know he kissed me because he wanted to? I can't...I can't take advantage of him, Tony."

"Speaking as the guy who watched him steamroll through a small army of people to get to you - and seriously, I want my kitchen knife back, tell him to get his own stabby things - I think you're safe in assuming that his feelings for you, however they are manifesting themselves, are the strongest things he knows."

Steve ignores the complaint about the knife which, fine, he didn't see the things Barnes did with it, lucky bastard. But he starts frowning again. "I can't assume anything. I don't know what Lukin did to him, I don't know what Zola did to him, I...I can't hurt him. God, I think I'd rather die than hurt him."

"Please don't." Tony grumbles. "Because then he'll get pissy and I'll have to work clean up. I would suggest, in lieu of dying, wallowing in your angst or sweeping it all under the carpet like you have since the thirties...maybe talk to him?"

Steve takes a deep breath. "Yes. I will. I'm going to." He says, almost like he is psyching himself up for it.

"You know what you're gonna say?" Tony asks, following Steve as he heads back into the bedroom.

"I love you?" He tries, "I mean, that's probably the best place to start, right?"

"Seems good to me." Tony nods, smiling.

Steve looks over at him gratefully. "Thank you," he says, "For everything. I know sometimes we don't see eye to eye, but I appreciate what you've done for us. All of us."

Tony practically chokes on his tongue. He's not used to such outright honesty from anyone, even Steve Rogers. "That's what friends do, right?" Tony manages to say, his heart pounding in his chest.

Steve nods, still smiling. "You're a good man, Tony. Better than your father was."

That blindsides him, hits him right in the chest and leaves him dizzy. "What...what do you mean? Thought my dad was the greatest?"

"When it suited him, he was." Steve agrees. "You're just a good guy. You try hide it but..." his smile lifts up even higher at the edge, "Think I'm getting better at reading you."

Tony swallows, hard. He needs out of there. He needs...

He needs to not know what he knows. He needs to not be keeping his father's secrets because Steve fucking Rogers thinks he's a better man than Howard... and how is Tony ever going to be able to tell him now that Howard did this to Barnes, Howard failed the both of them when they needed him the most... how is he going to be able to look himself in the mirror, knowing that, knowing what Steve has just said...

...when Tony doesn't have the spine to tell them.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

This one took a little longer than anticipated, so sorry for that! My feels keep getting in the way because [Ink Phoenix](#) writes angsty metas that leave me crying for a few hours at a time...

Also, research for the epic Howling Commandos era prequel is underway, so please feel free to [join me](#) as I moan about historical inaccuracies and try shoehorn dirty Army ditties into a Very Serious fic...

We're on the home stretch now and I've saved the worst of the angst for last. Enjoy this chapter and it's cute fluffiness because it's gonna be the last :p

“You absolute bastard!” That’s Pepper’s first remark when they take the Asgardian Express directly to the tower a day after their battle with the British (Super) Secret Intelligence Service. She looks like she hasn’t slept in days and, taken off guard by their sudden arrival, is shocked and upset enough to belt Tony in the arm - hard. He yelps as the bullet wound Steve eventually guilt tripped him into having treated flares with pain and her furious expression crumbles into something scared and tearful. “Oh my god, are you hurt? Tony! Are you hurt? I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, oh god...” she rambles, as she always does when she’s really upset.

“Hey, no, hey,” he says, taking hold of her elbows gently and pulling her close enough to wrap her in his arms. He’s vaguely aware of the others making themselves scarce and he’s grateful. He’d kiss her, audience or not, but now they are alone he can allow that little bit of himself that is only for her to shine through. “I’m fine. Honey, I’m fine,” he has to repeat himself because she continues to babble worriedly, her hands fluttering over his arms and shoulders, looking for injury.

When she finds the one on his arm her upset grows exponentially. “You are hurt!” She says accusingly, “Oh my god, did you get shot?” She pats at the Asgardian clothes he’s been given - they’ve all been brought into Thor’s extended family, at least as far as clothing goes, though only Barnes and Sam still wear the armor they have been issued.

“Just a scratch, that’s all,” he says, stroking her hair back off her face. It needs a wash and she’s not wearing any make up, and he hasn’t seen her look so disheveled since the events with the Extremis virus. It’s agonizing to know that he’s the reason behind it. Again.

She chokes on a little sob and clings to him. “I thought you were dead!” She moans brokenly. “I thought...with the plane and, and...and then you--! Why the hell didn’t you call me? You didn’t have time between getting blown up and then nearly starting a war? I--“

“Hey, hey, I’m alright!” Tony soothes her, his hand curling under her chin. “You’re absolutely right, and I’m so sorry I put you through that and you have every right to be angry. But I’m alright, okay?” It takes her a moment, but she nods hesitantly. “Come on.”

He curls her hand into his and leads her inside where the others are lounging around the living room, slightly out of place and awkward in a way they weren’t before. Clint and Natasha are on the couch. Bruce has sprawled out over the armchair, his head lolling and his eyes heavy - he’s

exhausted, as he so frequently is after the change. Sam paces slowly behind them, occasionally throwing Steve and Barnes worried looks as he chews on his lip. Only Thor seems calm, and he stands with his arm crossed and his expression pensive.

“So what now?” Bruce asks, raising his head tiredly. “Gonna go out on a limb here and say we’ve taken a bit of a nose dive in the public opinion polls.”

“Well you haven’t started a war yet, but it’s a clusterfuck.” Pepper says flatly, surprising everyone with the bluntness of her language. She turns on one of the holographic projection monitors and fills the room with a half dozen news channels, all showing footage of the battle. Bruce features most significantly, but then he’s by default the most eye catching. “The British are stating that the events in London were a training exercise...”

“Seriously?” Tony yelps. “They’re spies, right? I mean...do they have no other excuses?”

“Anything else and they’d have to admit that A, there is a secret torture facility in the middle of the city and B, they abducted three Avengers,” Clint points out from where he’s tucked in under Natasha’s arm. Interestingly enough, they are much more open with the PDAs, and their fingers are twined together. From the way Natasha’s eyes keep darting across to his face, Tony thinks it is going to be some time before she’s ready to let him out of her sight.

“Not going to happen.” Natasha points out. “Political climate as it is right now? Even taking Clint and I out of the picture, the British government is never going to admit to trying to trade Captain America to HYDRA.”

“But what about Bucky?” Sam asks, looking worriedly over at where Steve and Barnes stand side by side.

“Well that’s where things get messy.” Pepper sighs, her eyes flickering over to Steve and Bucky, her gaze deeply apologetic. “JARVIS, can you bring up the recordings we made?”

“*Certainly, Miss Potts,*” JARVIS responds, and the new feeds change to earlier reports. There’s some very shaky footage of Steve, Barnes and Tony falling out of the window, and it zooms to focus in on Barnes. Most of his face is covered by his messy hair, so it’s almost impossible to get a good image of him, but when the footage changes to show Steve fighting the Winter Soldier in D.C. there is no denying the two men are the same. “The Russians are claiming it was an assassination attempt and the British are trying to cover it up. They want to know why the Avengers are in cohorts with the Winter Soldier. Given that what little information about him that has come to light since Washington was enough to put him at the top of half the world’s intelligence agencies most wanted lists, it probably isn’t much of a surprise that he’s taking most of the heat for this.”

Tony glances across to Steve just as the footage shows the Winter Soldier try and stab him with a combat blade. His expression is carefully shuttered, but there is absolutely no hiding the fear in his eyes. Barnes shifts a little as he watches himself try to kill Steve. Tony doesn’t know if the way Barnes presses their shoulders together is an attempt to comfort Steve or comfort himself. Possibly a little of both.

“So what is the story we’re spinning?” Natasha asks, her own eyes fixed worriedly on Steve.

Pepper sighs, “I spoke to Nick-“

“Fury?” Steve frowns, “I thought he was in Europe.”

“He was,” Pepper says, “and now he’s back in the country and Tony, he wants you to know you were supposed to call him back.”

“Oops?” Tony shrugs, not feeling all that guilty. He’s been a bit preoccupied in the past -- god, has it really been less than a week?

Pepper scowls at him, clearly unimpressed. “Nick doesn’t think the government is above extraditing Bucky to try and salvage some of the international relationships that HYDRA has managed to damage, and given the number of calls I’ve had to refuse to take in the past 48 hours, I have to agree. Bucky’s position is very precarious right now. We need to be thinking about how to spin this in your favor.”

Tony nods firmly. “Right. Statement time. The official story we are spinning is that the Winter Soldier is a person of interest to the Avengers and he is currently being held in custody at an undisclosed location,” Tony says brusquely. “JARVIS, get that out to the lawyers, to the nice people at SI PR, and to whoever came calling.” The mere idea of letting Bucky take the fall makes his skin crawl. If it gets to that, they won’t be letting it happen without a fight and Tony really does not want to go to war against his own country.

“Very well, Sir.”

“I mean, obviously you’re not being held being held, you know?” Tony says to Barnes, suddenly keen for him to understand the difference. Barnes nods, but Tony has the uneasy feeling that he’s only doing so because it is expected. He looks... well he doesn’t look entirely with it. His focus is on the news footage that continues to play.

Steve nods his head at Pepper, who turns off the feed. “I’m sorry Steve, I did everything I could to try minimize the damage but everyone is hyper paranoid after what happened with HYDRA and the international playing field is such a mess right now and-”

“No, thank you,” Steve shakes his head, “really. You’ve done more than enough,” he says softly.

“I’ll call Fury.” Tony says, “Get him here, talk face to face. We’ll come up with a plan,” he promises. “Until then, we sit tight and we ride this out.”

There’s a stretch of silent unease as they all contemplate their situation and the very precarious place their lives are now in. Then Steve says, “Look, you’ve all gone above and beyond the call of duty here. I wouldn’t blame any of you if you wanted out.”

Tony opens his mouth to call Steve a star spangled moron but is beaten to it by Bruce of all people, who smiles tiredly and says, “No offence, Steve, but you’re an idiot if you think we’re bailing on you now.”

“Doc’s right.” Natasha says, “we’re stronger if we’re together. We scatter now, we’re never pulling this off.”

“I call dibs on the couch,” Sam says, nodding his head in agreement.

“Ugh, yeah, I ain’t bunking with Stark.” Clint snorts, “which, I hope you realize you we are gonna be squatting in your living room for the foreseeable future.”

“Actually,” Tony says, “You’re not. Because someone in this room is, actually a genius and planned for the day when a government, the government or all the governments tried to kill us and had appartments installed for you guys. I mean, technically they are floors. You have your own floor, but-”

“Wait,” Steve stares at him, dumbstruck. It’s not a good look on a national icon. “You installed... floors? For us?” He’s not the only one looking at Tony like he’s just announced he’s running for presidency.

“It’s a skyscraper!” Tony protests, “Not that hard, not even that complicated, I was doing renovations anyway, you know, what with the giant mechanical alien lizards, and anyway, let’s hear it for my forward planning, yes?”

“Tony,” Natasha says, her voice oddly gentle, “We can’t accept-”

“You were fine with crashing on my couch,” Tony says with something terrifyingly close to a pout. Pepper leans in and kisses his cheek.

“I’ve got Fox News calling me. I’m going to go make them cry, why don’t you give the guys the tour, hmm?”

“Yes!” Tony agrees, snagging another quick kiss before she departs, “Enough with the gaping, let’s move you all in, shall we?”

Hustling a bunch of stunned superheroes into the elevator is easier said than done. They’ve all felt so alone, so adrift now for so long - especially in the wake of SHIELD’s destruction - that this feels more than just Tony offering them a place to crash. It feels like they are finally slotting together. They’re a well oiled machine in the field now, but this, the homefront, it finally feels like they belong. Truth is, Tony’s had space carved out in the tower for them ever since New York. He’s never expected they would actually be used, but he’s glad he is prepared.

When all of them but Sam in in the elevator, Tony frowns at him. “Dude,” Sam says, “not an Avenger.”

“The hell you aren’t.” Steve says stubbornly. “Get your ass in here.”

“Don’t argue with the Cap.” Tony grins, suddenly beyond excited as Sam steps inside and Steve nudges him with his elbow. “But this does raise a fair question since I hadn’t planned on new recruits during the building process. So, my suggestion is, you take Clint’s level.”

“Um?” Sam says, his eyes darting awkwardly to Clint. “I don’t know if that-”

“Nonsense!” Tony beams. “Birds of a feather, you’re practically related, it makes perfect sense.”

“I will throw you off the roof if you make one more bird joke.” Clint says dryly.

“And I won’t catch you.” Wilson adds.

“See?” Tony says, looking at Thor and Steve, who rolls his eyes. “Besides, shared floor for the newlyweds!” Tony beams at them, waving everyone out into the entrance hall of an exquisitely decorated apartment. Pepper has had more of a hand in Natasha’s floor than most of the others, and he thinks Maria Hill helped as well. The artwork is certainly not something that he would have picked for her, but she looks around curiously, almost smiling as she runs her fingers over the delicate curve of a glass table. She doesn’t even comment on his joke, which... they didn’t honestly expect him to keep quiet, did they? This is the cutest thing outside of Steve and Barnes’ mid-rescue smooch to happen to them in ages.

“It’s been four years.” Barton says dryly. “We’re hardly newlyweds.”

“Wait, you’re married?” Bruce stares at them. “I...wow. Wow.”

“My congratulations!” Thor says, clapping Clint soundly on the back. “We should celebrate!”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking!” Tony grins. “I mean, you know I love a good party.”

“No parties.” Barton says sternly. He’s standing next to Natasha, who has her gaze fixed on Steve...who is slowly going very, very red. She cocks her head, and then suddenly grins, huge and bright, before she dissolves into fits of giggles. It’s so entirely unlike her usual behavior that it knocks the surprise of her and Barton’s unannounced nuptials right out the window.

“Relax, Rogers,” she laughs. “You didn’t impugn my honor or anything.”

“There’s a story here.” Tony says, glancing back and forth between Steve and Natasha. “I know there is. Tell. Details.” Anything that can turn Steve that color needs to be shared. Preferably with a skywriter.

“There’s nothing to tell.” Steve says, his teeth gritted together.

“We kissed.” Natasha says, her shit eating grin still enormous. Tony’s eyebrows hit his hairline and he glances at Barton, who seems as amused by everything as Natasha is. Clearly he’s not the jealous type. Which--

“Wait. You kissed? Context: give it to me.”

“We were on the lam,” she shrugs, “Rumlow was about to make us, so we kissed.”

“Technically you kissed me.” Steve mutters. Even the tips of his ears are pink now. Beside him Barnes is looking at him with a slightly puzzled expression but, and it might just be wishful thinking here, he almost looks amused.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t enjoy it,” Natasha says smugly.

“Captain America, home wrecker...” Barton sighs, shaking his head.

“I’m so sorry!” Steve blurts, at which point Tony completely loses it. It all goes downhill from there -- Thor’s laughter booming bright and loud, Sam barely stifled sniggers giving away to a full on belly chortle, and even Bruce’s chuckling, far more at ease than Tony’s ever seen him. Tony just keeps laughing until his jaw hurts -- hasn’t laughed so hard in what seems like years, and it feels good, better than he could have ever expected.

“Oh my god,” Tony gasps, bent double and clutching his ribs, “this is the best thing ever.”

“I’m sure you did mankind proud, Steven.” Thor says consolingly, a trace of mirth still in his voice. Bruce snorts loudly, tries to smooth his face back in a more neutral expression.

“At least she didn’t try shoot you.” The soft Brooklyn drawl cuts across their combined amusement and Tony watches as Steve turns wide eyes on Barnes - Bucky. There’s something in his eyes, affectionate, almost warm, that belongs only to Bucky.

“You remember that?” Steve asks breathlessly, and Tony knows exactly what he’s talking about -- the time Agent Carter emptied a clip at Steve’s brand new vibranium shield. One of Howard’s favorite stories to tell, that one was.

Bucky pauses, frowns, then nods his head hesitantly. “You told me. It...I-- laughed?” He looks like he doesn’t quite remember how to laugh anymore.

“Yeah,” Steve says, lighting up like Times Square at Christmas, “You laughed. You laughed a lot.”

“I remember. I think?” But then his brow wrinkles and his expression becomes pained, his metal hand going automatically against his temple, clutching at the side of his head.

“No, hey, don’t push yourself.” Steve says gently, grasping his shoulder to steady him. Bucky closes his eyes, but lets his hand drop back down. He shakes his head experimentally, jaw tight as if there are too many thoughts knocking around in his mind. Steve looks up at Tony, helplessly.

“Hey Steve?” Sam says, his gaze compassionate, “how about Stark gets you and Bucky settled in? I think we can figure our own way around, what with the disembodied voice and all.”

“JARVIS is an AI.” Tony says absently, chewing on his lip.

“I would be happy to help you get settled in, Mr Wilson.” JARVIS says.

“See?” Sam says to Steve, who is looking so grateful as he allows Tony to herd him and Barnes back to the elevator, “We got this, man.”

“Thanks,” Steve mutters quietly, his gaze reflecting the depths of his relief at being able to get Barnes some place quiet and secure.

There’s actually three bedrooms on Steve’s floor, which is good, because Tony doesn’t want them to be forced out of their comfort zones by practicalities. They arrive, and he leads them to the master suite, hovering in the background as Steve looks around the room in wonder, his smile fading as he catches sight of the tight line of Bucky’s jaw. “How you feeling?” Steve asks, gently brushing Bucky’s messy hair from his face.

Bucky hesitates for a second, the fear in his eyes heartbreaking. Tony doesn’t know if it is because he’s afraid to vocalize what he is feeling, or if he is afraid of Steve’s reaction, but either way, it hurts to see.

“I... I’m fine.” Bucky says, clearly lying through his teeth. He’s white with pain and he moans when Steve tries to sit him down. His back shudders with a tremor that races through his entire body as he leans almost unconsciously into Steve’s hold.

“Is it your head?” Steve asks, “Come on Bucky, you don’t have to hide this. I can’t help if you don’t talk to me.” Bucky very reluctantly nods. “You’ve got a lot to process, and you’re still exhausted.” Steve tries to soothe him, brushing his thumb tenderly over the frown lines at Bucky’s brow.

Bucky chokes back a pained cry as the gentle touch seems to snap something inside his mind and clutches at Steve’s back, burying his face in his neck. “It hurts,” he sobs, his trembling worse now.

Steve looks at a loss as to how to help. Every time they gain some ground, they lose something in return. Every step they take forward is another two back. He kisses Bucky’s brow and glances up at Tony, “Do you have any spare clothes?” He asks, his hand pressed against the armor Bucky is once again wearing.

“Yes!” Tony says, glad to be able to spring into action and do something useful. The chest of drawers in the bedroom is filled with t-shirts and sweatpants - basic workout gear, since Steve has his own wardrobe. Tony snags a fresh set of clothes and returns to hover at the side of the bed.

Steve’s managed to unfasten the heavy body armor and has tossed it down on the floor, leaving

Bucky in a fine undershirt, the same house Arms embroidered at the throat. He shivers and Steve suddenly pauses. “Hey,” he says, “you want a shower?”

Bucky nods, small and scarcely noticeable if not for the fall of his hair. Steve brightens and pulls him to his feet. When Bucky wavers unsteadily, he holds him firm. “You need me to come in with you?” He asks, and Tony has the feeling that now might be the time to start making a slow and silent exit. Bucky nods again, even smaller this time, and Steve tugs his own shirt over his head.

“I’ll...if you need me,” Tony says, making a beeline for the door. This is not something he has any right to intrude on. “Just, JARVIS will be around, and-” He’s almost made his exit when he hears the agonized moan from Bucky and spins around in fear, half expecting to see him break down like he had done in the lab.

Now, Tony’s seen Steve half undressed before, and he’d been running around in only pants while the escaped London, so it’s not like Bucky hasn’t either. Tony’s as surprised as Steve. Then Bucky lets out another pained whimper and flinches back.

“Bucky?” Steve frowns, dropping his shirt, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I shot you!” Bucky moans, his wide eyes glassy with hysteria and panic.

Steve freezes and Tony can hardly breathe. How the hell is he going to address this one? He can’t say that it wasn’t Barnes who shot him...it was. Bucky, Barnes, the Winter Soldier...they are all the same person and there are elements of each of them so tightly entwined with the other that Tony doesn’t ever think they’ll untangle themselves.

“Well, yes, you did.” Steve says hesitantly.

“I shot you!” Bucky repeated himself, scrambling backwards. “Oh god, I shot you.” Bucky’s always known about the encounter on the helicarrier, he’s not had those memories wiped from him, but it seems like this is the first time that the man who loves Steve Rogers has actually computed what really happened.

Steve doesn’t scar, not like Barnes, who is a tapestry of old wounds, and so the three entry wounds on Steve’s chest are no longer more than faint pink circles on his skin. In another month they’ll be gone altogether. But Bucky seems torn between backing away and pressing his fingers to those damning marks, his shoulders hitching as he struggles to breathe.

Steve gently catches his fingers and draws them to his lips. “Yeah, you did.” He says, “but see,” he lowers Bucky’s hand to the curve of his shoulder and presses his fingers to skin. “Wasn’t the first time. Christmas 1943 we were trapped in a town south of the Rhine, deep in Axis territory. I was in the square and you were in the treeline, covering our backs. There was another sniper, in the clock tower, and he was pretty much keeping us pinned. Gabe and Monty were trying to get to him but he had me dead for rights and his cover was so good you couldn’t get a shot at him.” Steve’s voice is a low, soothing murmur that quietens even the tremor in Tony’s own heart.

Bucky hasn’t removed his hand from Steve’s shoulder, and Steve hasn’t let go either. They’re lost inside their own little world.

“It all really happened at once,” Steve continues, “a HYDRA agent came out from nowhere, and the sniper took a shot at me. And so did you. Fortunately yours hit first. Right here.” He squeezes Bucky’s fingers, right over the curve of his shoulder. “The impact knocked me out of the sniper’s path, his shot killed the other guy and a couple of seconds later Dernier decided we were all taking too long and blew the clock tower up instead. But you got separated from us. By the time you made

it back to the RV you didn't know if I was dead or alive. You were.... pretty upset."

Tony imagines that to be the world's greatest understatement.

"So I'll tell you now what I told you then," Steve says, reaching up with his other hand to cup Bucky's cheek tenderly. "I'm alive because of the choice you made. I'm not saying it wasn't hard and I'm not saying it didn't hurt like hell, but the fact that we are here, now, having this conversation? It's because of you, Buck. You've always looked out for me, always protected me. Even when you didn't know who I was, you still made the choice to save my life."

Tear tracks gleam in silver and white down Bucky's cheeks. "You're the only thing I know," he confess brokenly.

Steve leans in, kisses him slow and gentle, and Bucky's arms find their way around Steve's back, and yes, that really is Tony's cue to leave. He's already overstayed what is decent.

He leaves them to their privacy, their peace, heading down to the labs with the image of Bucky's haunted eyes following his every step.

He pushes down his anger, his fear, and he pulls everything else on top of it. He has adjustments to make to the suit.

He has work to do.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

hides behind army of puppies

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So in conclusion, you’ve placed yourself at the top of HYDRAs most wanted list, pissed off every world power outside of North Korea and adopted the single most dangerous man on the planet like he’s some kind of stray puppy.” As always, Rhodey manages to infuse the words ‘godfuckingdamnit Tony’ into everything he doesn’t say.

“I think a more apt comparison would be a kitten. A very angry, angry kitten. One with claws. Sharp claws. And a complete disrespect for kitchen utensils.” Tony’s flat on his back rewiring the processor that powers his workbench. It’s three fifteen in the morning but he’s wide awake, which means Rhodey needs to be as well.

“That’s what you’re choosing to comment on?” Rhodey sighs. *“Jesus.”*

“Actually it’s Tony, how long have we been friends?” Tony uses his teeth to hold his screwdriver while he adjusts the tension of a couple of nuts with his fingertips.

“Too long.” Rhodey sighs.

“You love me.”

“I tolerate you.” Rhodey corrects him. Tony can’t help but remember saying the same thing about Steve. *“Sometimes. You know it’s the middle of the night, right?”*

“I was aware, yes.” Tony says, “Hey, you forgot to mention the whole space travel thing.”

“I...what?”

“In your list of stupid and reckless things I may or may not have done. Space travel.”

There’s a beat of incredulity. *“A sentient alien life form...and you’re what we send to represent humanity.”*

“I greatly resent that comment... hey JARVIS, fire us up!” Tony slides out from under the bench.

“What exactly are you doing?” Rhodey asks.

“A thing.” Tony explains. “Technical. Boring. Hey, you wanna come over tomorrow? Bring pizza. Like, a lot of pizza.” He doesn’t want to hazard a guess as to how many they would need to feed eight Avengers. A lot. Lots of a lot.

“I’m working.” Rhodey does actually sound regretful. *“That thing some of us do when we aren’t blowing up government property.”*

“Technically that was Thor.” Tony says, feeling the thrum of energy beneath his fingertips as

JARVIS adjusts the power levels to the bench. “And fine, be boring, see if I care. I have other friends.”

“*Angry kitten friends?*” Rhodey asks in disbelief. Tony gets it, he does. Rhodey is worried about him. It’s a thing he does when Tony does something especially crazy - like take on a secret group of government crazies, or space travel, or adopt brainwashed assassins.

“Exactly. Which, speaking of...” He’s been so preoccupied with chatting away to Rhodey, with tinkering in his lab, that he’s completely missed the second presence in the room with him. “Gonna call you back.”

“*In the morning, Tony.*” Rhodey warns. “*Like, an actual hour when normal people are awake.*”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tony says absently, ending the call and leaning back casually against the bench. He gives his guest a few minutes to come out of the shadows of his own accord. When almost ten minutes pass in increasingly uncomfortable silence, Tony decides to prompt conversation himself.

“Hey.” he says, casual as he can. “Where’s Steve?”

Barnes doesn’t step out of the shadows, but he does shift, which is enough to reflect a small amount of light off his metal hand, and give Tony a visual reference. “Sleeping,” he says.

Tony nods. That’s good. He doubts Steve has slept much at all in the last month, enforced chemical coma aside. He still has a lot of healing to do, both from the drugs and the extensive surgery he’d needed just to keep his insides, well, inside. He’s almost as good at hiding his pain as Barnes is, which is something of a problem for all of them. Tony’s glad he’s sleeping.

But he is suspicious that Barnes is down here, first chance he’s unsupervised.

“So,” Tony starts, “I got coffee. If you want?” He waves a hand in the direction of the coffee maker over by the wall. He’s not surprised when Barnes doesn’t take him up on the offer. “Can’t sleep either? Personally I think people miss out on all the best hours of the day because they are sleeping.” He’s rambling a bit, but in his defence, Barnes is giving him nothing, and Tony himself has had a lot of coffee and not much sleep.

“I suppose,” Barnes says, which is better than nothing.

Tony realizes he doesn’t know what else to say about Barnes’ sleeping problems without being pushy or insensitive or really, really inappropriate. So he changes the subject. “How’d you like the apartment?”

“It’s...nice?” Barnes tries. He steps cautiously out of the light and Tony sees for the first time that he’s dressed in the loose dark blue pants Steve wore in Asgard and a warm hooded sweatshirt. He’s paired them up with the heavy boots Thor gave him and somehow manages to still look dark and brooding.

“You can come closer, you know. I won’t bite.” He tries to keep his tone as light and gently teasing as he can, but Barnes tenses anyway.

“I might.” He whispers. “I remember-“ Barnes says, and his face in the shadows is a contrast of harsh lines and hollow spaces, “-him.” Tony doesn’t know if he’s referring to Lukin or Zola or someone else entirely. “He, in my head... I might...”

“Might what?” Tony pushes him as gently as he knows how. “What is it you’re afraid of here, Bucky?”

"I'm not-" but Barnes falls silent before completing the lie. He stays that way long enough for Tony to need to shift his legs to work out the stiffness in his knees. Then, finally, he looks up and meets Tony's gaze head on. "You're not scared of me."

That takes him by surprise. He has to think about it for a second. In reality, Barnes is capable of cold blooded murder and probably far worse. The things Tony has seen him do...the things he knows the Winter Soldier got up to under HYDRAs care...well, any sensible man would be scared. Fortunately for them both, sensible is not something Tony has ever been accused of being.

"You're not a threat to him," Tony says gently, "not to any of us." When Barnes says nothing in response, Tony tries to be more enticing, "really. You saved my life, remember? More than once, I might add. Steve's too."

"You don't know that." Barnes responds, just as softly. "I nearly killed you. I nearly killed him. I would have killed both of you in London-"

"But you didn't," Tony responds earnestly. "You didn't. You resisted. You didn't want to hurt us, and you fought against it."

"This time." Barnes says, his jaw clenching. "What if-" He swallows and his eyes dart to one side. "I think...I don't know what they did to me. It's just...I have these flashes and they hu-" he cuts himself off, his shoulders tight and almost hunched with the anticipation of punishment. He'd responded the same way when speaking back to Lukin - cutting himself off, afraid of the reaction when he dared express himself.

It's not wonder he doesn't tell anyone when he is in pain - he's probably incapable of differentiating between something small and inconsequential and something potentially life threatening - the punishment for believing himself worthy of comfort or care for either no doubt swift and brutal. "But they don't feel like they are mine."

"Whatever they did, you're not a threat to us. I have the data from the program, all of it I think, just... just let me go through it all, okay? I'll prove it to you." Barnes is already shaking his head but Tony carries on, a little desperate now. "Just...give me a little time. Please?" He wants so badly for Barnes to see things the way Tony does - to see how far he has come, how strong he is for resisting. But Barnes only sees the distance left to travel, insurmountable odds stacked in his path. He sees only the weakness. "Can I ask you something?" Tony says after a long moment of silence, trying a new tactic.

Barnes nods hesitantly.

"Why did you kiss him?" Tony's so careful to keep his voice as neutral as possible, but he startles Barnes anyway. His eyes widen, as if he's not really thought about the reasons himself.

"I..."

"Was it because you wanted to?" He's being a bit unkind here, but putting the question to him in a way that requires a yes or no answer is the only way he knows he'll actually get a response.

Barnes cringes again, that same expectation of pain, but then slowly and with every ounce of bravery Tony knows he possesses, nods his head. "Yes."

It's still not enough though, and Tony takes it one step further. "Why?"

"What?" Barnes looks confused by the question.

“Why?” Tony repeats.

“Why what?” There is the smallest edge of annoyance there that makes him fight back a smile.

“Why did you want to kiss him?” It’s a hard question. Probably the hardest Barnes has been asked in a long time. If you asked Tony why he wanted to kiss Pepper he’d not be able to give you a single reason, and he wasn’t contending with nearly a century of repressed emotions, torture and psychological abuse.

“I..I love him.” Barnes stammers out of nowhere. He looks so honestly confused that it breaks Tony’s heart.

“You love him?” Tony echoes, finally smiling, “is that the problem? How is that the problem?”

“Because...” Barnes starts to say, then falls silent. This whole disjointed conversation is enough to give Tony one hell of a headache, and he’s the non-brainwashed one. “Because...because I-“

It’s agonizing to see him try and put his thoughts into words. Barnes has been denied the freedom of expression for so long that now he is in an environment where it is allowed, no, encouraged, he’s at a complete loss. If he’s even able to form the thoughts cohesively in his head, he sure as hell doesn’t know how to convey them verbally.

Tony’s torn between staying quiet and letting him struggle to figure it out, or gently encourage him with his own words. Both have their pitfalls. He tries to stay firm, but he defies anyone to look Barnes in the eye and not fold like a house of cards at the sheer volume of hurt they see there. What the hell, tough love was never his thing anyway.

“Love’s a scary thing,” He tries gently, “That’s okay.”

“I’m not scared,” Barnes says stubbornly, his jaw set with an almost confrontational petulance that reminds Tony of his own teenage years. Barnes is lying through his teeth. Of course he is scared. Tony can practically smell the fear on him, and he doesn’t have superhuman senses, just an inkling of the terror Barnes is feeling and an impotent rage to accompany it.

“Okay,” he says as gently as he can. It’s hard not to sound patronizing. Hard not to sound like he is trivializing anything Barnes has endured, because words like ‘I understand’ and ‘I get it’, while they might be true, are out of place and almost laughable. Tony doesn’t understand, not really. He can try, and he is, but he has no idea what is going on inside Barnes’ head, and he doubts Barnes does either.

All he does know is that he can’t mess this up. Not now. He’s messed up so many things in his life, made so many bad choices and pushed so many people away with careless words and actions. He can’t do that this time. It’s terrifying really, knowing how much is at stake here. For whatever reason, Barnes is here, with him, and Tony needs to find a way to reserve that tiny seed of trust that is blossoming between them.

“I-“ Barnes stammers again. He looks at Tony, desperate and lost, aching for someone to give him the answers. Tony wishes he could, and the thing is he knows, deep down, that if he were to tell Barnes right now to go back up to Steve and stay with them, he will do exactly as he is told.

Suddenly Tony feels sick. What if this is it? What if Barnes is right? Tony was so sure that there can’t be any triggers in Barnes’ head to turn him against them, because Barnes has resisted the urge to kill Steve not once, but twice now. Tony’s thought, foolishly perhaps, that this is because Bucky is shining through, his love for Steve giving him the strength to resist his conditioning.

Tony's an idiot. He's gone and done the one thing he swore he wouldn't do. He's gone and separated Barnes' personalities in his mind, giving them attributes and characteristics that have no actual place in who the man in front of him really is.

Barnes is not one man with three separate personas. He is one man with three very distinct instincts, and they are at war. And while they are at war, the dominant force will always be the instinct of the Winter Soldier - the protector, the hard shell around Bucky's raw and bleeding soul. And the problem with that is simple: Bucky knows and loves Steve in a way the Winter Soldier does not and cannot, but what the Winter Soldier can do, what he has done, is the very thing Tony warned Steve about, right back at the start of this horrible little adventure.

Barnes has imprinted on him. He's gone and replaced Lukin with another handler. He's gone and--

Suddenly Barnes' inability to express his feelings for Steve takes on a new, terrifyingly sinister angle. Tony remembers the way Barnes had cowered at Lukin's feet, sobbing and trembling, his arm wrapped around Lukin's leg, clinging to him like he was the only point of safety in his world. He remembers what he'd thought at the time, how disgusted he'd been that Lukin had used kindness and softness to shatter what little of Barnes might have survived his torture.

He remembers all that, but he's never, not for a single moment, thought of what that must mean for Barnes.

He's thought the Winter Soldier incapable of love, but in reality it's so much worse. The Winter Soldier loves Lukin because the man showed him the only kindness he's known in seventy years. It's not real love, not true, blinding, all consuming passion, or sweet, selfless innocence. It's a violation of the very worst kind, but he's unable to see that.

Outside of Hydra's clutches, the only point of reference the Winter Soldier has, the one thing that he's been able to identify, is Bucky's love for Steve, and he can't understand that beyond the sensations it provokes in him -- which he knows, because they are the very same sensations that Lukin had used to keep him under his own control for so long. The Winter Soldier's confused, and projecting his idea of love over Bucky's actual emotions.

It's going to end badly, and all Tony can think about is the fractured look in Steve's eyes when he said 'I can't hurt him', because right now, with Barnes in such a fragmented and fragile state, it seems like an inevitability.

"He's all I know." Barnes says, suddenly sounding as broken as Tony knows he is.

"I know." Tony whispers, remembering the way Barnes had said the same thing to Steve. "That's the problem, isn't it?"

He already knows where this is leading. Maybe, somehow, he's known for a while. Maybe that's why he brought them all here, so they are together for the fallout.

Barnes rubs at his eyes angrily. "I remember his birthday. I remember his favorite color. I remember him getting sick a lot. I remember wanting to protect him."

"Okay," Tony prompts when the silence stretches out for so long that he's sure Barnes has lost himself in his head again. He's still not moved from his spot against the bench, half afraid that to encroach on Barnes' space would be to trip the wire that is keeping him in check.

But Barnes steps closer as he is startled out of his thoughts, his face a portrait of hurt and confusion. "Okay?" He echoes, almost angrily.

“Not okay?”

“I don’t remember *my own* birthday. I don’t remember anything about my life before....this...if he’s not a part of it. And it’s not me, it’s -- it’s Bucky, it’s not...I’m not him!”

Tony forces himself not to react as Barnes becomes more upset. His first instinct is to call Steve, but he knows now that he can’t do that.

“I kissed him because I wanted to. Because I love him. And he loves Bucky, he wants Bucky and I’m not him I can’t ever be him!” There’s something wild in Barnes eyes as his tormented thoughts finally slot together in a way he can express them and they come tumbling out. “I can’t be what he wants me to be. I can’t be what I was and I don’t know what I am!” The tears in his eyes are angry now as much as they are pained.

That’s Tony’s cue to action, and he circles around to the rack of keys lining the far wall. He selects one then holds it in his palm, wondering if he’s about to make the worst mistake of his life, or somehow start to make amends.

With the key in hand, he takes his wallet out of his back pocket and thumbs out a credit card. Then he straightens his spine and approaches Barnes.

“You know how to use this, yes?” He holds out the key and the card, keeping a few paces between him and Barnes. Barnes stares at him, then cautiously takes them from his hand, the set of his eyes suggesting he’s waiting for a blow. Tony stays perfectly still until Barnes retreats a step. Then, thinking of something else, he hands Barnes his cellphone. “It’s untraceable. Designed it myself after the whole SHIELD/HYDRA kerfuffle. You can use them, right? The cell and the card?”

Barnes continues to stare at him. “What are you doing?” He asks, bewildered.

Tony shrugs, it’s all he can do. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“I-“

“That’s why you’re here,” Tony says; and as soon as the words leave his mouth, he knows he’s right, the slight widening of Barnes’s pained, shadowed eyes the only confirmation he needs. “Can’t just take off in the middle of the night, we’d assume the worst. We’d come after you.”

“You’re not...you’re not going to try stop me?” Barnes looks so wounded and confused at the idea of being allowed to exert his own free will that Tony knows he will never, ever be able to stand between him and the door.

“I could,” Tony says, refusing to lie. “I think if I told you to go back upstairs to Steve, I think you’d go,” Barnes says nothing. Tony takes a deep breath, “And I think that’d make me no better than HYDRA.”

Barnes clenches his jaw, visibly holding back tears. He looks completely overwhelmed, and Tony wishes he knew what was going through his head when he decided that Tony of all people would be the one who left his preverbal running away from home note with.

“You won’t come after me?”

“I can’t promise the others won’t try.” Tony sighs. “Steve will... I’ll look after him, okay?” And he will, even if Steve won’t let him. Tony’s pretty sure any grounds he and Rogers have made up to this point is about to get napalmed into oblivion by what he’s doing, but he’s willing to go there anyway. It’s the right thing-- the only thing to do. The fallout is going to be messy though. Steve is

going to be angry, but worse, he'll be hurt. And scared.

Tony has to take a breath and think this through one more time, he has to double check, triple check every option, just in case there is one he can take that will mean no one has to be hurt by this.

He's not surprised when he comes up empty; it doesn't make it any less painful.

"I don't want to hurt him." Barnes says, clutching the keys Tony has handed him. "But I can't--"

"I know." And he does. "Just...can I ask you one thing?"

Barnes hesitates, then nods. "I won't trace the calls, I won't track the card, just...use it? Please? You don't need to be on the streets or skipping meals or...just, look after yourself, okay? Like you would if you were Steve." That stings a reaction from Barnes, who flinches like the idea of comparing himself and Steve never occurred to him. "And please, call? Leave a message? You don't have to talk to us, any of us, but we do need to know you're still out there and okay." And not back in HYDRAs hands, Tony doesn't add.

Barnes slowly reaches out and takes the phone from Tony's hands. He nods. "I'd check in every forty eight hours. Before. I can do that."

"If you want to," Tony nods, relieved. He doesn't think Barnes is naive enough to think that Tony won't be able to track him with the card, but so far he seems open to the idea of trusting him. He's no idea how long that will last.

"I...thank you?"

"Don't thank me." Tony all but begs him, thinking again of Howard's signature on the document that started all this. He doesn't think he can bear the weight of Barnes' gratitude. It's too much.

Tony leads him through the collection of cars to a black Jaguar. It's the least ostentatious and flashy vehicle he owns, even though it did come with a 200k price tag. "Just...remember what I said? That you don't have to do any of this alone?" Barnes opens the vehicle door then hesitates before climbing in. "We know what you've done. He knew who you were then, and what you are now, and when you're ready, He's still gonna be here. All of us are. You aren't alone."

Barnes doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to. He stays quiet and slide into the driver's seat before gunning the engine. Tony can see him place the credit card and phone carefully on the passenger seat. "There's a charger in the glove compartment!" He says hastily as Barnes closes the door.

"Shall I open the garage doors, sir?" JARVIS asks him somberly.

"Yeah." Tony sighs.

He half expects more hesitation, more nerves, but Barnes doesn't wait for the garage door to open fully before he's tearing out into the night with a squeal of rubber and a roar of an engine, leaving Tony to wonder just how desperate he's been to get away from them.

And for how long.

Chapter End Notes

peers out from behind puppies

Nope.

hides again

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

All hail the [editing queen](#)!

Writing this chapter made me sad. Come [snuggle with me and some cute fluffy things](#)
:P

Tony stares out into the night for what seems like an eternity. He's not stupid enough to think Barnes will have a change of heart and turn the car around, but moving from that spot will mean accept the decision he's made, and with it, the consequences. His mind is all over the place, wondering if this is a good idea, a bad idea, and how long it's going to take Steve to kill him when it finds out.

Rationally, he knows Steve won't actually kill him. That doesn't mean Tony isn't deathly afraid of what his reaction's going to be, and what this will do to his mental state.

"Christ, J, what am I supposed to tell him?" He asks JARVIS, dragging his hand through his hair in distress.

"Truth's probably a good place to start."

Tony shoots a foot in the air at the sound of Steve's voice, and he spins around, half panicked, half worried, to find him leaning in the shadows at the far end of the garage.

He expects Steve to look angry, hateful. He doesn't. He looks small, his shoulders hunched and his back curved, as if he's willfully trying to take up less space in the universe.

"I...I..." Tony tries to think of something to say, an excuse, maybe, or a deflection. He's got nothing. "How long were you standing there?"

"Long enough." Steve says quietly. The garage door closes on Tony's command, leaving them cocooned from the world.

Tony has no idea what to say. The look on Steve's face is heartbreaking. The knowledge that he most likely heard Tony and Barnes' conversation and still found the strength to let Barnes leave is even more so. Tony doesn't know how he does it. He's frequently thought that, marveled at Steve's strength of character and wondered if he'd manage the same if the situation were reversed.

"It's not you he's running from." Tony finally decides to say, but he knows as soon as the words are out of his mouth that Steve doesn't believe him.

"Yeah, it is." Steve's voice is rough, his eyes oddly bright in the garage's semi-darkness. Tony closes the distance between them, tentatively placing a hand on Steve's shoulder.

The thing is, maybe it is. Maybe it is Steve that Barnes is running from; Tony honestly doesn't think even Barnes knows the answer to that. "He's confused, that's all. He just needs a little space, a little time." Tony encourages gently. "He'll come back."

Steve nods, but Tony gets the feeling that he's doing it more to appease Tony than out of any actual belief. He straightens up, wiping at his face as he does so. "I'm gonna go...I'll be upstairs. If you need me." He sounds so listless, so hollow, and Tony wishes he were screaming, shouting, beating the shit out of Tony for taking the person he loves most in the whole world away from him. Again. He's been trying to prepare himself for anger, violence, even. Not this. Steve is passion and fire and no small amount of stubbornness.

He's not this.

"Steve," Tony says, tightening his grip on Steve's shoulder. "I-- I'm sorry, I didn't... If there had been any other way I would have never--" The weight of his decision is nearly unbearable in the face of Steve's quite heartbreak, and he remembers what he'd thought when he'd followed Steve's orders after the plane crash - the right things always hurt the most.

But though Tony wants to talk, to atone, Steve just slips away into the shadows and is gone as quietly as he arrived, leaving him standing alone in the garage, wondering exactly how to be of any use.

Tony drags his hand through his hair in frustration. "What do I do?" He asks, speaking to both the world, and the one people who will always answer him.

"Sir, I'm afraid there's not a lot anyone can do for Captain Rogers at this point." JARVIS manages to sound the perfect mix between matter of fact bluntness and sympathy.

"Pepper could do this." Tony mutters to himself. "What would she do, JARVIS?"

There's a short silence before JARVIS replies. *"I think Ms. Potts would remind you that just because we say we want to be alone, we often don't mean it."* That's true. How many times has Tony himself used those words when all he really wants to do is soak up the presence of the people he is most afraid to let close to him?

He nods. "Right. Good point. You got eyes on him?"

"Captain Rogers is in the recreation room with Prince Thor."

Tony races for the elevator. "That...well that's good. I guess. Or bad. Both?" Potentially destructive to property, that's for certain, but Tony doesn't care. After the chitauri, he kind of given up on any hope to ever be insured again.

"I could not say, sir. I should advise you that agents Romanov, Barton and Wilson are also present. Doctor Banner just left his lab and is on his way."

"Jarvis, did you tell on me?" Tony couldn't be mad, even if he wanted to. He doesn't want to do this alone. He needs help.

"Sir, might I remind you that you've recently acquired a large number of tenants whose primary occupation is espionage?" JARVIS is back to sounding like he frequently questions Tony's intelligence, and at least something is right with the world.

"Yes. Right. Fair point."

He finds Steve just where Jarvis told him he'd be, in the communal gym he had built in the large rec centre. Jarvis hadn't specified what Steve was doing in the gym, but Tony's not surprised to see him and Thor beating the shit out of each other. Not even a little. Of all of them, Thor's probably the best person to help Steve work out his aggression.

It's disconcerting, seeing Steve turn such violence on a teammate, but Tony's not surprised to see just how deep his anger really runs.

Thor, for his part, does not seem phased. If anything, he is goading Steve on. They can only have been fighting for five, ten minutes at the most, but they are both bloody and the ring they clearly started the fight in has been reduced to waste material.

"They're gonna be a while." He hears Natasha call him over to the side of the room where she, Clint, Bruce and Sam are sat atop a couple of weights benches that have been pulled together, and Tony smiles, wry. Jarvis was right-- you don't out spook a spook, especially not a spook like Natasha. She's doing a damn fine job of shuffling a pack of cards, even with her splinted arm.

"Steve tell you?" He asks, dragging over a chair and joining them. Normally this would be where he would go hide himself in the lab and not emerge for a week, but he finds himself desperately needing the company.

More than that, he wants them to say the things that Steve hasn't. He wants them to hold him accountable for their leader's broken heart. He's probably going to be waiting a long time for the recriminations though, if the look Natasha aims at him is anything to go by. "He didn't have to," she says, sighing, "he was always going to run."

"How'd you know that?" Tony asks her.

"Because I did." She said softly. "Different time, different place, different set of circumstances...but...I know where he's coming from." Tony glances over at Clint, whose face is tired and lined with worry, but whose eyes are fixed upon Natasha and are filled with such warmth and love that Tony can't help but hope there can be a happy ending here. If Natasha can learn to let Clint love her, maybe Barnes can do the same with Steve?

"Dealers choice?" He asks, letting the subject drop out of kindness.

"You're gonna get your ass kicked either way, Stark." Barton snorts.

"Good job I'm a billionaire then, huh?"

"I'm just putting this out there," Sam shakes his head, "but Thor is hereby banned from participation for like, forever."

"He get you good?" Bruce shots him a soft smile that grows when Sam shudders dramatically.

"God of Thunder my ass," he mutters. "God of Cheating Cheaters, more like."

Natasha's smile is small and a little proud. "He had a good teacher," she shrugs, glancing back at Steve and Thor, who by this point have managed to break and shatter everything within twenty feet of them. Sam follows her gaze, and his expression softens into one of concern.

"How long do you think they're gonna beat on each other?"

"My money's on a coupla hours." Clint shrugs.

"I hear that bet and raise you all day." Tony puts in.

"No way, man. They can't keep this up a whole day." Sam shakes his head.

"Is that an official opinion? You putting your money where your mouth is?" Tony smirks,

collecting the cards Natasha hands him.

“Are we really betting on how long our dearly upset teammate is going to spend beating up another teammate?” Bruce asks, looking slightly disapproving.

“Hell yes.” Tony and Clint respond in unison.

“Rogers would totally do the same.” Tony adds. “Don’t let the grandpa shirts fool you, I’ve heard stories about him that would leave you shocked, horrified and a little horny. Old man Rogers isn’t half as sweet and adorable as he looks.”

“On your fucking left.” Sam mutters to himself as he glares at his cards. “Okay, you’re on. You say a day, I say three hours. No way they can keep that up any longer.” He says as much just as Steve manages to physically kick Thor so hard into the wall he leaves a dent in the plaster.

“So, we have a day, as have three hours, we have two hours...care to wager, Mrs Barton?”

Natasha rolls her eyes. “I’ll pass.”

“Lame,” Tony sighs. “Doctor Banner?”

“Does not approve.” Bruce says mildly.

“Fine fine, three bets it is. Winner takes all, and by all I mean they don’t have to work clean up when Thor and Cap are done. Agreed?”

“It’s your hand, Stark.” Natasha says, drawing the topic to a close. Tony glances down at his cards. It’s a shitty hand, no matter what game they are playing.

Figures, really.

And in the end, none of them win the bet, though Tony claims victory since he is technically the closest.

Steve and Thor are at it for nearly thirteen fucking hours. Even though Tony did say a day, he was mostly joking. He never imagined for a minute they would actually go on for so long, but they do. After less than half the time has passed, they all are watching with a mix of horror and fascination, and even Thor seems surprised by the sheer fact that Steve is not only standing but powering on, regardless of fatigue or pain. It’s brutal, and it’s messy, and it reaches the point where Steve’s not relying on his strength any longer, but his skills.

They fight until they are exhausted, until Steve physically can’t throw another punch, even if he wanted to, and then Thor, who by all rights looks as bad as a man being beaten solidly for half a day should, hauls Steve up, claps him on the back, and then physically carries him off to bed.

Tony doesn’t think he tucks him in and reads him a bedtime story, but hey, who knows when it comes to Thor. At least they can be reassured Steve is guaranteed to sleep if Thor works his magic healing touch, and he needs it. When Thor returns, Tony has pizza waiting for him, and he lights up in gratitude, oblivious to the awed looks they give him. Talk about taking one for the team.

Steve actually does sleep a solid twenty four hours, the stress and emotion of the last several weeks catching up with him at once. They use the time to put their heads together and figure out what the hell they are going to do now. Pepper keeps the press as busy as she can, and Maria Hill is roped into stalling their meeting with Fury - something she does with a look of absolute incredulity - but all they can really agree on is that no one can know that the Winter Soldier is no longer in

Avenger's custody. Tony doesn't for a moment imagine that Barnes is safe from the threats in the world, but he's not about to advertise the fact that he's out there alone.

They take turns to sneak silently into Steve's room, but on the two occasions it is Tony's, Steve hasn't so much as twitched. It makes them panic, feeling rudderless without Steve at the helm, but once again it is Thor who shoulders the brunt of things, his ageless eyes sad and filled with empathy as he tells them all that Steve is still Steve, still the man they know and look to for stability, but he needs time, he needs patience. He needs love. It's an uncomfortable reminder of how much Thor himself has lost recently, and if he vanishes later to speak softly into the cell phone he cradles in his hands like the finest spun glass, no one will ever mention it.

When Steve finally drags himself up into the main level of the penthouse, bleary eyed and pale, they shuffle him to the table and force him to eat, even if doing so looks like the furthest thought from his mind. Thor pours him glass after glass of milk and Clint piles one waffle after another on to his plate, and they keep up a low, quiet conversation that is carefully omitting the real world from mention. As far as Steve needs to be concerned, the only things that exist for him is this tower and the puzzle piece he's missing, along with a fair chunk of his heart.

Steve seems happy enough to let their conversation wash over him, only speaking after eating, his voice quiet and heavy, laden with the burden of too many years. Tony has to strain to hear him from the other side of the large dining table. "I meant to thank you," Steve says, making Tony choke on his coffee in distress.

"What for, my god?" Tony says, clearing his throat uncomfortably. He can't handle Steve's gratitude any more than he could Barnes.

Steve doesn't seem to hear, or doesn't want to elaborate. "I'm sorry about your car, and just whatever expenses he makes, I'll cover them. You didn't have to--"

"Stop. Right there. Christ." He has no idea what he's doing, none at all. He feels so useless, and it tears a hole in his chest. "Look, I know I said I wouldn't track the card..." And he feels like shit for suggesting it, but maybe if Steve knows Barnes is okay, if he has actual proof, then he won't look like someone has ripped out his heart.

"No, I don't -- I'd rather not know. I don't think.... I think if I know where he is, if I know then I can't promise I won't go after him." Tony can see the conflict in him, clear as the stars above Asgard. "I told you," Steve continues, his eyes shadowed and wounded when he looks up at Tony, "I would die before I hurt him. I can't trust my judgement right now."

He stands with deliberate, controlled calm, and Tony can only stare at him in silence.

From there, the afternoon passes into the evening quietly. They all have other things they should be doing, but it's like they all decided to claim the main area living room as the perfect place to do said things.

Sam has either forgiven Thor for his humiliating cards defeat, or he's trying his luck again. They are supervised by Bruce, who seems to find the whole quiet back and forth banter between the two of them endlessly amusing as he quietly sits and drinks what Tony imagines is tea but looks like tree bark.

Tony is sat on the floor, building...something....out of scraps he's found under one of his couches. It beeps occasionally, and Natasha shoots him sleepy scowls from where she is sat on the couch, Clint's head in her lap and a copy of *Wuthering Heights* propped up against his shoulder.

In the middle of them all is Steve, who stares silently into nothingness. If he's aware of what is going on around him, he doesn't care enough to acknowledge or participate. There's only one thing on his mind right now.

They have all lapsed in quiet silence when the phone rings; the atmosphere of the rooms goes from slow and moody to tense and alert in less than half a second, and Tony can hardly believe it's been two whole days since Barnes left them.

Steve's head snaps up, his eyes wide and hopeful, and it would probably be kinder if he just stabbed Tony in the gut and was done with it.

"You wanna...?" He asks, holding the phone out to Steve, who shakes his head.

"Just pick up," he says, clearly afraid that it's going to ring too long, and Barnes will hang up. Tony sighs and answers the call.

"Hey," he greets, as calm and level as he can manage.

There's silence on the other end, dead silence, which suggests that Barnes is inside somewhere. That's a good thing, Tony hopes. It means he's not out on the street either starving or freezing to death.

The silence stretches on for long enough that they all start to twitch, suddenly worried that he's hurt, that he can't talk to them, that he needs them, that Tony was fucking stupid to let him leave in the first place and he's going to-

"Hi ." Barnes says, soft and hesitant.

"Hi! Hi." Tony says, feeling his spine straighten with anticipation. "How are you?"

"I...I said I'd call." Barnes says, still hesitant.

"Yes! You did! Thank you!" Tony says, feeling like an idiot.

"Is...is Steve?" Of course the first thing Barnes asks about is Steve. Of course it is. Over on the couch, Steve's expression is agonized.

"He's fine." Tony says, his eyes locked with Steve's.

"He's not...is he mad?" Barnes sounds a little worried, a little scared, and it hurts like hell.

"No," Tony says, "He's not mad. Do you...do you want to talk to him?" He regrets it as soon as he says it.

"No!" Barnes says hastily. "*I'll...I'll call back. Forty eight hours.*" And then he hangs up. No further comment. No extra words. Just a dead line that hangs in the air like a foul curse.

A soft, broken sob breaks the silence. Steve's shoulders are hunched, his face buried in his hands as his heartbreak tears free from the chained confines he's restricted them to.

The rest of them look at each other, lost and hopeless, with no idea what to do or how to help as Steve tries and fails to hold back his tears.

It's Natasha who surprises them. Natasha who uncurls herself from Clint and crossed the room, who pushes gently at Steve's shoulders until she can pull his head to her chest, her fingers in his hair and her voice a soft, gentle croon as the dam breaks and he clings to her, so much pain and

loss pouring like puss lanced from a wound.

It hurts so damn much to see Steve like this, to witness his pain and know that under any other circumstance, they would never be allowed to see what they are seeing now. Tony rubs angrily at his own eyes, furious with himself as he watches Clint wedge himself on Steve's other side, and Thor move in closer to Natasha, so that his arm is draped across Steve's shoulders. Bruce, who always does his best to avoid outpourings of emotions, be them his own or other people's - for legitimate reasons, Tony might add - climbs out of the armchair and takes a spot on the floor, his back against Steve's knees.

Tony can only stare at them, this small, broken circle of people who all try so very hard not to show the world how deep their wounds go and feels such a fierce swell of love that when his eyes burn again he is no longer ashamed.

He's known it, before, that he loves these people enough to do anything to protect them. He knows their hurts cause him pain, that their joys, so small and fleeting though they are, will be preserved in his memory forever, but until now he's never really understood what that means in the bigger picture.

Now, watching them cluster around Steve, silent and supporting as he breaks apart before them... now he gets just how powerful this really is. It's enough to save the world, to vanquish alien invasions and monsters, to protect people from the things that would do them harm.

And maybe, just maybe, it will be enough to do what seems almost impossible: maybe it will be enough to heal wounds that no one should have been forced to live with.

"What do we do?" Tony asks Sam, who, though he has not joined the physical pile of bodies on the couch, stands tall and serious, a watchful sentry with his knowing eyes seeing all.

"Nothing." He says softly, "believe it or not, this is actually a good thing."

"It is?" Tony whispers, unable to tear his eyes away from Steve, who is holding on to Natasha with such desperation that he must surely be leaving bruises on her fair skin. If he's hurting her, she gives no indication, just strokes his hair the way Tony remembers his mother doing for him when he was small and scared and the world seemed full of monsters. "Is that what this is? Good?"

"This is grief." Sam says kindly.

Tony supposes that it is. This is a man who is finally, finally mourning the loss of the love of his life.

Slowly, Tony stands. There's no room on the couch, so he circles behind it, presses his hand to the strong curve of Steve's shoulder, and squeezes.

The physical contact says what they are all thinking and no one needs to vocalize.

It says, with all the love they can possibly radiate, *you are not alone* .

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up: this chapter is deeply unpleasant. There are graphic portrayals and discussion of torture, specifically waterboarding, that some readers may find disturbing, so please proceed with caution. I've added Stockholm Syndrome to the overall tags of the story, but it's especially relevant here. There is also mention of medical torture, mutilation and vivisection.

No one is in a good headspace in this chapter, especially not Steve. I really do not endorse any of his coping mechanisms.

Ink-Phoenix, who gets ALL the cookies for editing this horrible chapter, also made a [beautiful mix](#) It will either help/hinder your feels, depending!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You ready for this?”

Tony straightens his tie and his smile at the same time, and turns his head towards the doorway where Natasha waits. Her hair is short again now, soft curls that brush her cheeks, and it makes her look a little less dangerous than the straight, sharp lines of her shoulder-length ‘do had done. She’s paired the new cut with a pale blue dress and nude pumps, and she’s all set to go out there are do on a global scale what she has been doing her whole life: she’s going to convince the world she is soft and sweet, harmless. She’s the perfect foil for Clint, whose naturally resting bitchface expression has settled into something even grumpier.

“I’m Tony Stark,” Tony says, cavalier attitude already in place. “I was born ready.”

Natasha rolls her eyes. “Whatever you say, Tony.”

Tony shrugs and quickly checks his reflection in the mirror. Pepper picked out the suit, and he has to say it’s dapper as fuck. Satisfied he’s going to present to the world exactly the image he wishes to, he strolls to the door and offers Natasha his arm. “Shall we?”

She shakes her head fondly and walks past him, out into the hall. Clint’s snort of amusement says it all really, and Tony’s actually quite glad she didn’t take him up on it. He’d have been obliged to offer Barton his other arm, and he really doesn’t think the press are ready for anything quite so controversial.

Bruce already opted out of attending the conference, stating that given his current mood he was more likely to break something - or someone. Thor has been with Jane in England for the last month, and Sam merely held up his hands and pointed out that to the rest of the world he’s a nonentity.

Tony and Natasha are the obvious choices, and she and Clint are still an inseparable unit these days, which is how the three of them get their last checks from Pepper before preparing for battle.

He’s already been fitted with a collar mic, and a technician quickly runs sound checks. They’re

holding the conference in Stark Towers, so they control everything, including how long the press have to wait.

Eventually though, there is no more stalling, no more excuses they can make, so they enter the conference room and take their seats. Pepper kisses him softly before they go, then squeezes his hand and returns to the penthouse where she, Hill and Fury are deep in cohorts.

Hundreds of cameras flash in front of them, but Tony's been doing these things for years, and Natasha is hardly a stranger to the press circuit these days. Clint's a little less comfortable, but he masks it by scowling at anyone brave enough to make eye contact.

"Right," Tony says, "So, you're here, you've got questions. Let's have them." There is no point beating around the bush.

He spots Christine Everheart in the front row and calls on her. She might be a terrifyingly ruthless reporter, but she's got integrity. Tony can't deny that. "No Captain America?" She asks.

"Captain Rogers is indisposed." Natasha responds.

Christine doesn't look impressed. She's not jumped on the whole superhero bandwagon like many of her colleagues. "You don't think it is long overdue he answers for the incident in D.C.?"

"I think," Tony says coolly, "That Steve Rogers has given this country everything a man can possibly give, and owes you people jack shit."

"Is it true he's hunting down the Winter Soldier? Who is he? Who does he work for? Why is he of such interest to the Avengers?"

"Okay, firstly that's more than one question. That's like, five questions, and the answer to all of them is: we have no comment to make on the individual known to the world as the Winter Soldier. So don't ask."

"So you *are* hiding something!" A colleague of Christine's from the Post speaks up out of turn.

"Only my disdain for the lack of actually important questions being asked, and I'm not sure I'm doing a good job of it."

"I think you're doing great," Clint tells him.

"Thanks buddy!" He flashes Clint a grin and turns back to the assembly. "Anyone got anything actually interesting to ask? Seriously, we built the anticipation this long, one would think you'd have had time to come up with better material."

"Here's my question," A kid from the Times asks, holding out his recording device. "We haven't heard anything from the Avengers in nearly three months, despite repeated requests from both domestic and international sources for an official debriefing of your latest...group outing, shall we call it? What really happened in London?"

"Training exercise." Clint says with a hard, terrifyingly glacial smile. "Don't you read the things you write?"

"You expect us to believe that?" He asks incredulously.

Tony nudges Clint's knee with his own and takes over the question. "Well sure, I mean, anything else would be wildly outlandish and implausible and really, do we even want to go there? But,

actually, I am glad you brought that up because on an completely unrelated but suspiciously familiar subject, I do have one thing I would like to say...not so much a threat as it is, I don't know, friendly warning..." He glances over to Natasha, "Would we say threat?"

"Promise." Natasha offers as an alternative. It's taken less time than they expected, but they've been given the opening to make the statement that is behind their motivation for holding the conference in the first place.

"Yes. Promise. I like that. We have a promise to make you, and that is this: if you - and by you I mean you, the guy watching this in your underwear and you, the head of your country's governing party and you, the leader of some super shady military operation that works out of a million dollar complex in the capital city of a sovereign state - if you make a move against the Avengers, if you try and extort, blackmail or threaten us, if you hurt our families, or our friends, or the barista who makes our favorite skinny lattes, if you come to our door looking for a fight, if you blow up my plane, if you kidnap and torture our teammates, if you try and trade them to an evil Nazi Cult...we will treat you as a threat equal to that which was posed by the Chitauri, and we will respond with equal enthusiasm."

"What Stark is saying," Clint says, his narrowed eyes scanning the room full of stunned, silenced reporters, "is that if you fuck with us, we'll kill you."

Tony blinks and swears he can hear Natasha sigh next to him. The room is filled with shocked faces. "What he said. Only with a little less of the death threats."

"Smidge." Clint says, still mercilessly deadpan.

"This is why we can't have nice things." Natasha sighs again. "Are there any more questions?" There's a long beat of silence, then the room explodes with activity as a few hundred people launch to their feet, all asking questions at once. "No? Good. Thank you for your time, but we have work to be getting on with."

That's the cue to leave. Tony's still strung too high and too tight, even as they navigate the room and make it to the private elevator. "Well, that wasn't entirely horrible I guess?" Tony muses. "I mean, the threats aside..." Fury's going to kill them.

Natasha just rolls her eyes in Clint's direction. He he smiles, sheepish, so unlike his usual *let's see if I give a fuck oh wait, I don't* grin, and she shakes her head fondly. Tony once thought that she had him wrapped around her little finger, and in many ways she does, but Clint has equal power over her as well. He never thought he'd see the day when two of the scariest badasses he knows becomes the most adorable couple in his life. The fact that they're letting Tony in enough to actually witness their devotion to each other is nothing short of humbling.

"Sir, Captain Rogers returned shortly before your arrival." JARVIS informs him as the elevator starts climbing floors.

"Steve's back?" Clint looks up sharply. "He okay?"

"He is in the lab." JARVIS says by way of an answer. In many respects, it is.

Natasha swears softly and Clint grabs her hand, squeezing. The three of them exchange a glance.

"I got this." Tony says softly, "you carry on up. See how much Pepper and Fury want to kill me over the press conference."

Natasha smiles gratefully and Clint nods, clapping him on the back in silent thanks. When they

reach the level of Tony's lab, he exits and lets them carry on upstairs.

In the three months since Bucky left - and he can't help but think of the kid as Bucky now, not Barnes... can't help how weird it feels to think of a man who is technically ninety five as a 'kid' either - Steve's been spending less and less time in the tower.

At first, Steve hadn't wanted to leave. He'd been consumed by the fear that Bucky might come home, need Steve, and he wouldn't be there. Again. Then, as days became weeks, as it became clear that Bucky wasn't coming back anytime soon, his mood has taken a distinctive turn for the worse.

A fortnight in to Bucky's self imposed exile, Steve had hesitantly asked if he could borrow Tony's new jet. He'd spent practically every waking minute plowing through the files and recordings they recovered from HYDRA, hunting down information, gathering names and locations and correlating them with dates, until he finally got a lock on a facility in Switzerland. Tony had known just from the look on his face what he was planning on doing, and he hadn't the heart to get between Steve and the one thing he had left. He'd given Steve the jet, made a joke about him not getting this one blown up that had fallen flat on its face, and so began what has to be the bloodiest coping technique Tony's ever encountered.

Instead of refusing to leave the tower, he is very rarely there these days. Tony wouldn't mind so much if he were in his own place, or staying in some cushy hotel, but he's not. He's traipsing across Europe packing the shit out of anything remotely HYDRA related with explosives and watching them obliterate.

Tony's the first person to own up to his own unhealthy coping methods, but this is something else entirely. Even if HYDRA do need to be eliminated with extreme prejudice, Steve's not doing this because it is the right thing. He's doing it to try and even some cosmic balance sheet that is tipped seventy years out of his favor.

And he's worrying them all, because it's Steve, and Steve is an idiot and stubborn and a bit of an asshole when he's in a temper, and he won't allow any of them to help him in his epic revenge quest. Not even Natasha and Clint are allowed, and they rather have the monopoly on bloody violence. He's even shut out Sam, who Tony hoped would be able to talk some sense into him; but even Sam will admit he's out of his depths when it comes to helping someone deal with this amount of trauma and guilt.

Having Sam hang back at the Tower with them, however, is a blessing in disguise. Even if Sam can't help Steve right now, he's working wonders with the rest of them, up to and including Pepper, and Tony's eternally grateful. Tony himself is yet to give in and let Sam headshrink him, but Sam's a sneaky fuck and somehow manages to pack a therapy session into a game of Mario Kart. Most of the time Tony doesn't even realize what's happening until he pauses an hour or so later and wonders why he feels a little lighter than he did the day before.

He's jerked from his semi-positive thoughts as the elevator opens on his lab, and his eyes immediately find Steve in the one spot he always navigates to when he's here. He's shaved and showered at least, but he's already deep into another recording.

This isn't anything new. Tony's lab has been witness to some real horror over the last few months. After watching a grainy recording from the late 1940s of Arnim Zola and his team of scientists saw into and dissect the remains of Bucky's mutilated arm while he screamed himself hoarse and eventually passed out from the pain, after Steve had taken the jet to the facility it had happened in and leveled it to nothing but rubble, he'd come back, watched more footage, collected more information, heaped more guilt onto his shoulders...

Staying and watching the footage is literally the very last thing Tony wants to do, but he promised Bucky he'd prove there was no hidden bomb in his conditioning, and being physically in the room with Steve while he self-flagellated is literally all he can do for him.

Tony knows Steve is aware of his presence as soon as he enters, and while the urge to make some kind of lighthearted greeting is breathtaking, he can't bring himself to joke about anything when the recordings are playing.

They have yet to get to the horrors of this one, but they are inevitable, Tony knows that by now. On screen in a lab twice the size of the one Tony currently works out of, Lukin is in discussion with a stern faced HYDRA agent.

"You assured us the asset is functional." She says, her imperious gaze fixed on Lukin, who seems greatly annoyed with her attitude. "It's my understanding that it's not just supposed to wander off on its own!"

"If you'd have done the leg work for your own mission correctly then there would have been no need for the asset to be out of cryofreeze for as long as it has been. The parameters of its usefulness are clearly stated in the file." Lukin snaps at her.

She doesn't look impressed. "The fact that a multibillion dollar weapon is only useful for seventy two hours at a time is more than a little disappointing. I understood that you had a better control of the situation."

"I highly doubt that, since you clearly cannot grasp what it is you are dealing with. The asset performs at peak function for a limited period of time, as has been the case since its commissioning under Doctor Zola."

"A problem that was highlighted at the time," She responds, "when you took over the program you guaranteed you would iron out the glitches in the system."

"Which I have." Lukin scowls. "The limited period of the asset's functionality is not a 'glitch in the system', it is a fundamental flaw in your ability to properly establish a mission baseline."

The one thing Steve seems to hate the most is the way they talk about Bucky like an object. They don't refer to him as anything other than 'the asset', and they call him 'it', not 'he'. No matter how many times they must have heard them speak like this, Steve's expression is always a mix of heartbreak and rage.

The HYDRA officer turns her back on Lukin. "There are growing concerns over how you are managing the project, Doctor Lukin. We feel you are becoming... too attached. The council have requested you package the asset and send it to the London facility for full recalibration. If there can be no solution found to the erratic behavior it is showing we will be considering decommissioning it."

Lukin's expression shifts momentarily to outrage before he controls himself. "That is unnecessary, Synthia. You mistake attachment for what is merely another facet of the programming. Zola controlled it through force, constantly living in fear of the day it snapped and turned against him, I do not have that concern."

"You're very confident for a man whose obedient pet just spent three days wandering around Brooklyn." Synthia says, her voice heavily colored with dark amusement. Steve visibly flinches at the thought of Bucky wandering, lost and confused around their old home.

“Details,” Lukin waves away. They both look up at the sound of approaching parties. “Allow me to demonstrate. Decommissioning the asset now would be a gross squandering of both time and money.”

Synthia inclines her head, mildly curious as a STRIKE team marches into the lab, surrounding Bucky, who looks... Jesus, he looks like hell. His hair is tangled and dirty, and there are a few days worth of stubble on his cheeks. He’s bruised and bloody, his arms bound behind him; he doesn’t seem aware of his surroundings, but as soon as he sees Lukin, he cowers.

“Do you see this woman?” Lukin asks him, forgoing all other greetings. Bucky glances up, his eyes wide and glassy. He nods silently. “She wants to decommission you.” Lukin tells him. “I told her it is not necessary, but she don’t believe you are committed to us. You understand what that means, yes? She is going to take you away and lock you up, and I cannot stop her.”

Bucky lowers his eyes and makes a very soft, involuntary sound. Lukin shakes his head sadly. “Now, I’ve convinced her to give you another chance. That you’ll accept your punishment and we don’t need to take any more...drastic measures. I trust you won’t let me down again?”

Bucky is white and trembling, his face a picture of confused misery as he shakes his head. “You can remove his restraints,” Lukin tells the STRIKE team who still circle them. They share uncertain glances, but at Lukin’s impatient tut, one moves forwards and does as ordered. From the angle they’ve all be standing, Tony hasn’t had a good view of what it is they have used to bind him, but the echoing sound of leather and metal hitting the floor suggests whatever it is, it’s heavy as hell. The STRIKE agent gathers the shackles up and steps back, leaving enough space for a number of Lukin’s assistants to step in and start removing Bucky’s body armor.

The complete inhumanity of the way Bucky is treated by these people sits heavy in Tony’s gut. He feels sick with guilt just for thinking it, but it has become something he expects from these tapes by now.

He and Steve have watched maybe two, three hundred hours or so of footage over the last few months. A small fraction of what numbers in the tens of thousand. He’d like to say nothing can shock him any longer, but it will only turn out to be a lie, he knows that.

He’d thought nothing could beat the horror of seeing Bucky strapped into that chair, of hearing his screams as his thoughts and memories are torn away from him. Then they had seen footage from the late 1940s, back before that technology existed. Instead of electro-neurological recalibration, as Lukin calls it, they’d settled for a good old fashioned lobotomy - strap him down, shove a metal spike up his nose and scramble his brains, safe in the knowledge that if they fucked up something they shouldn’t, given enough time the damage would heal itself.

That viewing was the first time Tony had followed up with a night of heavy drinking and a day of heavier hangovers, but it hadn’t been the last. Thor had introduced Steve to an Asgardian Ale which has the actual ability to get him drunk, and Steve had taken full advantage of it to try wash away the images and nightmares in his head.

Tony senses another one coming along now. Steve’s not an easy guy to haul over a toilet while he’s puking his guts up. It’s enough to warn Tony off joining Steve at the bottom of a barrel. While it might seem a damn fine idea at the time, Tony has enough dignity left to not want to be forced to put on the suit just to haul Steve off the bathroom floor.

On screen, they can see how Bucky’s metal arm, now it is no longer being restrained, is badly damaged. It’s not the same one he currently has, but an older model. It’s still sophisticated for what it is, but Tony can see the design flaws that have been developed out, and his brain automatically

files them in the corner of his subconscious where all data goes to simmer. The handicap to their asset seems to worry some of the scientists, but they take their cues from Lukin, whose stern parent expression is exponentially more disturbing once Bucky is standing naked in the middle of the lab. Without the armor it's even easier to see the extent of the damage he's taken. They've learned some time ago that HYDRA kept Bucky on a liquid diet, topped up with vitamins and supplements delivered intravenously. Three days with nothing has already started to have an effect on his body, and his ribs stand more prominent than usual.

It's moments like these that the full extent of HYDRA's brutality is most underlined. Bucky could kill everyone in that room without so much as a bat of an eyelid, even with the one arm malfunctioning. But he manages to look everything that the Winter Soldier shouldn't be: helpless, lost, and so hopelessly confused. He's not afraid, not yet, but it's only a matter of time.

They've tortured and mutilated his body and his mind to the point where normal human responses to most things are beyond his ability to express. Whether or not he feels them, Tony honestly can't tell. He thinks he does, but it's almost impossible to spot until they force those responses to the surface through one horrific means or another.

It's why Tony's not surprised when he's guided over to something that looks disturbingly like a mortician's table. The comparison forces Tony to remember that vivisection is actually something HYDRA have explored with Bucky. He sees the stony expression on Steve's face crack into sickened fear and remembers how violently Steve had thrown up when they'd seen that footage. He's already starting to shake, more afraid for something that has already happened than Bucky appears to be on screen.

The table is currently horizontal and low enough to the ground for Bucky to obediently lay himself down on it flat.

"Steve-" Tony murmurs quietly. Whatever is about to happen, it's not going to be pretty. Lukin has already implied as much. They aren't merely subjecting Bucky to one inhumane treatment after another in the name of science and progression...they are actively seeking to hurt him.

As soon as Bucky is laid down, Lukin appears at his side. He looks sad now, not just disappointed. "You understand why this is happening?" He asks. The question is in Russian, but since so much of their conversations are not in English, Tony has had JARVIS run a parallel translation program with every viewing. The AI has been invaluable in helping them sort through the mountain of files, looking for pertinent information. JARVIS has categorized each recording where a location is mentioned in the hopes of helping Steve narrow down his search.

Bucky opens his mouth, looks up at Lukin with wounded eyes, but can't quite bring himself to speak.

"Petrushka..." Lukin scolds, and Steve's knuckles go white on the couch's armrest. Tony regrets ever telling Steve the significance of that monstrous pet name. It's not unusual to see him hit things in anger these days, but it is disturbing as hell to see him punching the wall in his rage, not stopping until it is smeared with blood and his knuckles are out of place and mangled.

"I...I was bad?" Bucky still sounds like he doesn't understand what it is he has done wrong. Objectively speaking, he must know he broke HYDRA's rules, but he hasn't been wiped for nearly a week now according to Lukin, which means the breakdown in his conditioning has most likely already begun.

Lukin frowns. "I wish you wouldn't make me do this. Do you understand how much this hurts me?"

Bucky makes a soft, confused sound of distress, and reaches up for Lukin with one hand. It doesn't make it more than a few centimeters off the table before mechanical restraints are sliding into place. They fasten around his wrists and ankles, but one of the scientists adds additional straps across his chest, hips and thighs. They clearly don't want him thrashing around too much and Tony can't help the prickle of nausea settling in his gut.

Small pads are attached to his chest, hooking up a close by monitor that tracks his biological functions. His heart rate and blood pressure flash up on screen, along with a multitude of other information. His blood pressure is low, his blood sugar levels as well. He won't have eaten anything in the days he was missing, but these valid health concerns are ignored. This is a pattern Tony has seen on multiple occasions, and it has helped him understand why Bucky doesn't acknowledge his injuries: to the people who controlled his life for so long, so long as he remains functional any injuries are less of a concern to them than either a mission report, or torturing him further.

But of course they don't call it that.

Bucky opens his mouth obediently for the scientist who slides a plastic ring behind his teeth. Unlike the rubber shock guard which is designed to protect his teeth and stop him swallowing his tongue, the ring keeps his mouth forced open.

This is the trigger for his panic. He's been docile and obedient up until this point, but just as he had begun to hyperventilate when the chair moved into place for a wipe, his body remembers this process, and it is afraid. There are so many possible causes behind this reaction, and none of them are good. "Steve," Tony whispers, tentatively squeezing his shoulder, "Don't do this to yourself. Please, buddy."

The glare Steve shoots him is red, raw and broken, and it silences any and all of Tony's protests. With a heavy heart, Tony flops down on the couch next to him. He'll be damned if he lets Steve suffer through this alone.

"I'm sorry, Petrushka, I can't save you from their punishments when you refuse to let me help you." Lukin sighs, brushing Bucky's hair off his cheek before crossing the room.

From the angle he's bound in, Bucky can't see him leave - or not leave, as the case may be. This is a game Lukin frequently plays with him. He is never personally the one inflicting pain on Bucky, though all the evidence Tony has witnessed points to him having authorized it.

A black cloth is folded over Bucky's face, covering his nose and open mouth while blindfolding him at the same time. His hyperventilating is heavy now, and his limbs strain against their restraints.

Lukin silently gives the signal. The table tilts back, lowering his head towards the ground and elevating his torso and legs.

Tony's fingers dig into the palm of his hand as he watches one of the scientists extend a hose from a nearby basin while another clamps their hands on either side of Bucky's head.

As soon as the water hits the cloth Bucky's attempts at terrified screaming become incoherent sounds of pain and fear.

"Is this necessary?" Synthia frowns, not so much upset by the torture but confused as to its purpose. "You're only going to wipe him when it is done."

“His mind will forget, yes,” Lukin agrees, finally showing the true nature he hides behind a mask of kindly concern to shine through in a cruel smile, “but his body will remind him.”

Steve emits a pained sound, and looks about to be sick. His skin looks gray and sickly, and his fists are clenched so tightly Tony knows he is hurting himself.

They watch as the Hydra doctors soak the cloth with water for ten seconds, leave it over Bucky’s face for another ten, then peel it away as he gags and chokes and struggles to draw breath. They give him only a few moments before they repeat the process again. On the monitor his vitals spike furiously as his blood oxygen levels plummet and his pulse rockets in panic.

Bucky’s violent struggles put strain on his restraints, but they don’t give. Tony suspects they’ve been designed for this very purpose. Bucky might put up less of a fight when they cut him open or experiment on him, but even Hydra’s not stupid enough to expect him to remain docile through this.

The brain is hardwired to put breathing - oxygen - above all things. It is survival instinct at its very basic and no amount of training or indoctrination or conditioning will ever override the body’s need to breathe.

And that’s the thing with waterboarding. It’s what sets it apart from holding someone’s head under the water.

Tony’s experienced both. In Afghanistan - which...is getting harder and harder to not think about these days - they were not particularly inventive with their interrogation techniques. Mostly they held his head under the water, and don’t get him wrong, that’s terrifying as fuck. It’s bearable, so long as you don’t panic, but Tony defies anyone without proper training to be tortured by terrorists and not be panicking. Once you lose the ability to control your breathing, to take and hold as much air as you can before they force you back under, well, it’s game over.

But he’d been perversely proud with how well he endured, how level he managed to keep his head, even when it was being held beneath tepid, stale water.

The one time they’d waterboarded him had been an entirely different story.

Ninety seconds. That’s how long he’d lasted before he broke down crying and begging them to stop. Ninety fucking seconds. They’d found that funny as hell.

Those ninety seconds remain, perversely, the most terrifying of his life. Even after New York, even after nearly losing Pepper.

Words can’t describe what it feels like. He hasn’t tried, and sure as fuck doesn’t want to. Their set up hadn’t been half as sophisticated as the one HYDRA had at their disposal. Just him, a couple of guys and a bottle of water. They’d forced his t-shirt over his head and pushed him backwards over a table and then poured water over his face.

It shouldn’t be such a big deal. It doesn’t *sound* like such a big deal.

But sweet christ, it is.

It’s water running down your nose, down your throat and making you gag. It’s not being able to swallow fast enough to make a difference, to free your airways and suck in that one precious gasp of oxygen. It’s the incoherent terror of feeling like you are drowning but knowing you aren’t, knowing you won’t just slip away into relief, but that your tormentors alone can stop it.

It's helplessness in its purest form. It's...

He has to tear his eyes away from the screen as, four and a half minutes in, Bucky vomits. The angle he's held at means there is no risk of the water going to his lungs and him actually drowning, but it's impossible not to repeatedly trigger the gag reflex. The plastic ring means they can just tilt his head to one side, rise out his mouth, give him a few seconds to recover and then they can carry on where they left off.

Steve lurches to his feet, his body a tightly coiled spring of agonized rage. Tony doesn't know what he's going to do, if he's going to hit something or break something or scream his horror into the room. But he doesn't actually move any further. Just remains on his feet, ready to do something but not knowing what.

Tony gets to his feet, standing by his side after they watch the same torture repeated for nearly ten minutes. "Steve, buddy," Tony tries again, "Just-- talk to me. Why are you doing this to yourself?"

He already knows the answer, of course. Steve's punishing himself: for not saving Bucky, for not being around to rescue him earlier, for causing him pain just by existing...for kissing him and thinking that things could ever possibly be okay. The list is endless.

Eventually Lukin holds up his hand and calls a halt to the proceedings. He stands, crosses to Bucky's side and peels away the wet cloth as the table tilts back in a flat position. He eases the plastic ring out of his mouth and releases the mechanical restraints before unfastening the final ones by hand. It's creepy as fuck that he chooses to do so, that he presents himself as the only person with the power to free Bucky from his torment. He whispers soothing, gentle words that are too soft for the recording to pick up, and as soon as he is no longer bound, Bucky latches on to him and starts to sob. It's always like this with Lukin - Bucky only starts to cry when Lukin 'rescues' him, and they are tears of relief and gratitude. It's enough to make Tony wish he'd emptied a clip into Lukin's head when he'd had the chance.

Lukin combs his fingers through Bucky's wet, tangled hair and allows him to cling like the terrified child his mind really is. "It's over now, I forgive you, you're safe, it's alright, no one is going to hurt you."

There's a sudden flurry of movement as Steve kicks over the couch in an explosion of hatred. All Tony can remember in that moment is the way Steve had whispered the very same words after he'd restrained Bucky in the lab, after they'd pried him out of Lukin's clutches in London...

It's for this reason most of all that Steve inflicts this on himself. Lukin worked with the Winter Soldier for longer than anyone else alive. He is the biggest threat to Bucky and he poses the biggest danger to his recovery. These recordings prove to Steve that all the things he might instinctively wish to say and do to ease Bucky's pain already have the most horrific of connotations for him.

Bucky babbles mindlessly and they don't need the translator to understand when he sobs, "*Hvatit, hvatit, pozhaluista,*" in an endless mantra of hysteria and exhaustion.

"There we go," Lukin soothes, "it's over now. I know you're hurting, so I'm going to let you have your treatment and get some rest before we replace the cybernetic unit." Jesus Christ, only a man like Lukin could spin brainwashing and cryogenic freezing as positive things, but Bucky trembles and nods his head against Lukin's palm in relief. Lukin continues to stroke his hair, then looks up over to Synthia, who isn't bothering to hide her amusement. "I don't think London is necessary, do you?"

She smiles, "Send him to me when you've wiped him."

Lukin's expression sours, and Bucky doesn't even acknowledge her. "As you wish." Lukin says.

The images suddenly dies as the recording ends. Steve's expression is cold and he looks almost as dead behind the eyes as Bucky. Tony knows he's latching on to that location, that London laboratory they had referenced, like if by nuking it Steve can somehow undo years and years of pain and torment. Tony's so busy looking for the Steve Rogers he knows and loves behind that dark expression that he almost misses the bulge of bandages under Steve's shirt.

"Holy hell, what happened?" He demands, marching forward and poking Steve in the shoulder until he can get his hands on the hem of his shirt.

"Got shot." Steve says shortly. "It's fine."

"Okay no, the words 'got shot' and 'fine' are not friends. They do not hang out in the same sentences!"

Steve shoots him a particularly unimpressed frown and Tony digs his heels in, because it's bad enough Steve torments himself emotionally on a daily basis. This shit needs to stop. He says as much, but Steve's already marching upstairs. "Leave it, Tony." Steve says, sounding bone weary.

"No. Just, no. Look, I get that you're hurting here, Steve, I really, truly do. And you know what, maybe we've fucked up here, letting you do this for so long but...you getting out and beating the shit outta bad guys beats you crying into your Bran Flakes so..." He breaks off and sighs. He means it, every word. They have tried to give Steve the distance he claims he wants, tried to respect that fact that he's an adult, and he can cope with things however he damn well choses so long as he does actually make a choice. But this...they can't let him risk his health. "And what are you gonna do now, huh? Head up for food and a rousing game of Monopoly with the gang?"

"Maybe I am." Steve says stubbornly.

"Bullshit." Tony calls, "You're gonna get back on the jet that literally only just landed this morning and probably wants a nap, and you're gonna head out to London to find this elusive HYDRA base Lukin mentioned, completely ignoring the fact that the last time we were in London we destroyed a few million pounds worth of property and they kinda sorta hate us right now!"

"Do you actually have a point to this?" Steve asks him, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring down at him.

"Do I have a point, he asks. Yes, actually. I do. Look, just...come get some food. Sleep in an actual bed for a night. Bucky's due to call this evening anyway and-"

"But-"

"And then," Tony glares right back, speaking over him. "Then tomorrow we will all go and deal with this shit together, as a team. Because I for one do not want to have to tell the kid that I let you get shot twice in the same week."

"He's not a kid." Steve says.

Tony sighs and pinches his nose. "And you're not listening to me."

"I am." Steve protests. "I just..." He looks so incredibly hurt and lost, Tony is physically incapable of not grabbing him and pulling him into a one armed hug that Steve reluctantly returns.

“Just stay tonight, okay? Let us in.”

Steve’s eyes shimmer with tears and he nods hesitantly. “Maybe, maybe he’ll want to talk to me this time?” He asks, breaking Tony’s heart with his hopeful expression. That’s probably another reason he focuses so much of his energy on hunting down HYDRA. Anything is better than the knowledge that even after all these months, Bucky still can’t bring himself to talk to him. He’ll ask how Steve is doing, if he’s okay, and one time if he’s remembered to take his vitamins because it’s getting colder and everything always goes to his lungs. But he can’t bring himself to speak to Steve directly, or hear his voice. The one time Steve picked up, Bucky dropped the phone in a panic and Tony had to talk him through an anxiety attack from the other end of the line.

Tony can’t bring himself to say what he thinks, that Bucky probably won’t be ready for that for a long time still, not when Steve looks so miserable. So he smiles instead and squeezes Steve’s shoulder. “Maybe, yeah. Now come on, let’s have Bruce take a look at that gut wound of yours. Can’t have the Star Spangled Man with a plan springing a leak now, can we?”

Steve doesn’t answer with the snark he once might have, but he follows Tony to the elevator, which...he’ll take the victories where and when he can these days.

Chapter End Notes

" Hvatit, hvatit, pozhaluista" - enough, enough please
(thank you ilien for the translation! :))

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

YAY! We made it!!!

A couple of things to note with this chapter:

1. It will not round everything up. That is what sequels are for.
2. It draws far more heavily on the comics than anything we've had yet, and will hopefully tie in with a little of what we know about AoU.
3. THERE IS AN EPILOGUE. IT IS FROM STEVE'S POV. IT IS SAPPY AS HELL. YOU ARE WELCOME. :P
4. It will not round everything up. I repeat this because motb was never supposed to be the story in which everything gets fixed. It's the story in which all the wounds are drawn to the surface so that healing can begin. That healing story will continue a lot of the threads that have been started here. I set out with the intention that by the end of this chapter all the cards are on the table so to speak. Hopefully that is where we will end up - ready to dive into Bucky and Steve's uphill struggle for redemption/revenge/happiness.

Long notes aside, I just want to say thank you so much to everyone who has supported, encouraged and assisted this story. I'm honestly overwhelmed by your feedback, and it has been an absolute delight to go on this little trip through angst and woe with you all! Thank you, really <3

And of course to my sun, moon and stars, on whom I blame everything :p You can thank/blame her for the epilogue as well :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So,” Tony says as the suit locks in place around him, “we all set?”

From the grim expressions on both Natasha and Steve’s faces ‘set’ is probably a less appropriate term than ‘prepared’.

He can’t say he blames them for their trepidation. He’s marginally freaked out himself, and he has no idea why.

They’ve been in London for almost a week now, having flown in on that Monday only to be greeted by a fleet of diplomats, politicians and police, all of whom wanted to ensure that another ‘training incident’ did not occur.

Natasha had been the one to charm them out of the media circus, saying that Steve was only in London to revisit some of his old Army day haunts, and that she and Tony were there for moral support. Since they had already decided not to bring along the whole gang - for this very reason - eventually the shitstorm had died down, after a few days. They are still followed everywhere they go out in public, but the three of them are nothing if not skilled at avoiding attention by now, especially if they really want to. Even Tony is learning how to fly under the radar. It’s for that reason alone they have not imposed on Thor and Jane, who have somehow managed to carve out a

slice of normal in her parents' flat in Islington. He's their backup, should things go to hell. Having a god on speed dial is a useful thing.

Finding the location of HYDRA's base of operations has taken every bit of their considerable deduction skills. JARVIS had provided the information from the tapes they have had on file, and the three of them had carried on from there. It took time, but eventually they had found their site.

HYDRA's London facility, unlike MI19s swanky digs in Kensington, turns out to be located in an abandoned factory in Wandsworth, three miles south of the river, nestled between two housing estates and a community centre.

From the outside it looks abandoned, and when Tony has JARVIS do a sweep of the whole building's infrastructure, he finds only two life signs.

The only way they know they are in the right place is by cross-checking local sewage and power gripe for the area - they are using far more juice than an abandoned building should, and even with private generators, it sparks activity on the grid around it. Nothing is ever as isolated as it might try to be, and ripples of energy can be read across the entire area.

"I got containment," Natasha nods, running her hand over her rifle, "just try not to make a mess like last time. We're in a populated area - you can't just level this one."

Steve nods his head grimly. As much as he might like to, they can't blow the site to kingdom come like he's been doing for the past several weeks. Instead, they are going in to make sure it's inactive, that there is no trace of HYDRA presence, and that nothing dangerous has been left behind.

"Don't worry, we'll blow the next one up," Tony says, trying to cheer Steve up. It doesn't work, so instead he follows Steve through the broken chain fence surrounding the site and across the deserted parking lot. It's close to midnight, so hopefully no one will see Captain America and Iron Man just waltzing in to an abandoned factory. Tony's already spinning some wildly outrageous story though, just in case.

The doors aren't even locked. The city council haven't touched the place, which is again a suggestion of someone else being involved with its ownership. It should have been bolted and chained up, at the very least.

They can see the presence of local kids all over it as they step into an empty and cavernous open space. There is graffiti across most of the walls and broken glass crunches beneath their feet. Tony spots the odd needle and what he suspects is a used condom beneath a pile of overturned paint cans.

Cheerful place.

While it's obviously used as a meeting place for local kids, right now it stands empty.

"Well, this is anticlimactic," Tony sighs. Steve is stock still and radiating frustration beside him and Tony can't help but wonder what's going to happen if he doesn't find some kind of outlet for his anger soon. He'd never once have suspected Steve capable of the kind of rage he so clearly is, but he can hardly claim to be shocked by it.

What he is shocked by, however, is the sudden jerk of the floor beneath them.

Steve braces his arm as he stumbles and they move into a ready position as they and the ten feet of ground surrounding them sink down below the floor.

“This is weird. You agree that this is weird, right?” Tony asks, glancing over at Steve.

Steve nods sharply and tightens his grip on the shield. “Stay alert,” he says, “we don’t know what we are dealing with here.”

“Our ideas are the worst,” Tony moans, keeping his balance as the floor continues to descend beneath them.

There’s clearly a hidden elevator here but it must have been tripped by someone - probably one of those two life signals Tony had picked up - and it puts them both on high alert.

But there is no one waiting for them when they finally come to a stop thirty feet down and at the end of a corridor that seems to stretch on forever.

He doesn’t know if it’s the unnatural movement of the floor, or the brightness of the space they are suddenly in, but he feels nauseous, almost dizzy. He shakes his head to clear away the cobwebs and looks around.

The walls are a gleaming white, just like the floor and ceiling. It’s blinding bright and Steve has to hold up his shield to deflect the light from his eyes.

“Less anticlimactic,” Tony muses, “more creepy. Is it me or does this remind you of Resident Evil?”

Steve frowns at him, “That’s the one with the zombies, right?”

“Yes! Zombies!” Tony nods, pleased Steve hasn’t repressed all memory of the night Barton convinced them to watch the first three movies. “This is creepy, right?”

“Just focus,” Steve says, obviously not expecting zombies to jump out at them. Tony hopes he’s right. He can’t deal with that level of weird or gross right now.

“J, you picking up on anything?” Tony asks. There is no response in his head, only silence. “J? Buddy? You there?” He looks over at Steve in a panic, tries to recalibrate the system manually....nothing. “I am officially freaking out right now, just so you know,” he tells Steve. “Are we walking into a trap here? Because...” He doesn’t finish his sentence.

“Not like we can turn back now,” Steve says grimly. “Nat? You picking up anything out there? Nat?” The line is silent, dead. Their worry mounts. Natasha can take care of herself, but...

“The worst,” Tony shudders, feeling horribly alone in the suit without JARVIS with him. He doesn’t know what has caused the sudden disconnection but it would be too much of a coincidence to blame a technical glitch when they have just descended into something right out of a sci-fi horror movie. Nothing about this sits right with him.

They walk down the corridor for what seems like forever, seeing nothing in the way of either an end, or a door.

Then suddenly the wall on their left is gone. Tony blinks, flipping the suit’s visor up to focus properly. The wall must’ve been a door of some kind, because beyond it there lies a wide, darkened room.

Steve and Tony share a glance, and they enter.

There are only three things inside: a plain, unadorned desk, a looming man dressed in black, his

face covered in a sinister looking mask, and a well dressed woman.

The man he can't place, but the woman he recognizes immediately.

She hardly looks a day older than she had appeared in the recording they saw before leaving for London - but Tony knows that file was dated 1991. Her sharp features are paired with dark eyes and unnaturally pale skin, offset by a razor sharp, almost masculine suit. "Mr Stark," she inclines her head, "Captain Rogers."

She had been given no other identification in the videos, other than being addressed by Lukin as 'Synthia'. Since they don't want to give away how much information they have, Tony tips his head to one side and asks, "Should I know you? Have we met?"

"We have not, Mr Stark. Captain Rogers and I do have a shared acquaintance, however."

"Don't you dare talk about him," Steve growls, tense at Tony's side. The fact that he hasn't rushed forward and unleashed that brewing violence is something of a shock. He's practically shaking with his rage, every muscle in his body tense and strained.

Her eyebrows raise in amusement. "I was not referring to Sergeant Barnes, though he and I are acquainted. I was referring to my father. I hate to utilize such an old cliché but since you did kill him, I'm surprised you don't remember."

"I've killed a lot of people," Steve says darkly, reminding Tony once again that he's not as squeaky clean and innocent as he's so often perceived. He's a soldier. He's The Soldier.

"Think carefully," Synthia says, "I'm sure it will come back to you. You were opposite sides of the same coin, after all."

Tony looks at her blankly, then glances over to Steve, whose expression is pinched and dark with disbelief. "You're the Red Skull's daughter?"

Synthia inclines her head, "My father was Johann Schmidt, yes."

Tony gapes in horror. "That asshole procreated? Wow. Wow. That's a mental image I could have lived without." Tony shudders then looks again at the large, masked man standing behind her. There's something very familiar about him, but Tony can't quite place it. "Who's Jack Skellington over there?" He asks, pointing in his direction.

Synthia doesn't even glance behind her. "An acquaintance."

The man smiles and his mask morphs with his face, forming a sinister skull with teeth bared and the flesh peeled back from its bones. It's grotesque.

Steve elects to ignore him, his focus fixed on Synthia. The Red Skull creeps people out even now, and Steve actually knew the guy. She looks young to be his daughter, probably around Tony's age, but she has to be much, much older than her appearance. "You're the head of HYDRA." Steve concludes.

Synthia does not look impressed. "All these years of fighting, Captain, and you still do not understand us. I am one head of HYDRA. One of many."

"And why exactly are you here? This is hardly the kind of Ritzy digs I'd expect the head of HYDRA to be hanging out in," Tony says before Steve can respond. Better they find out why they have been lured into this little conference now and get the hell out of here. His nerves are

practically on fire.

"Because i knew you would be," Synthia leans back casually against the desk behind her and crosses her ankles demurely. "I want to propose a parlay. A cessation of hostilities on both our parts."

Steve actually laughs. It's a cold, bitter sound, so unlike the Steve Tony knows that it unnerves him more than the Red Skull's daughter, more than the silent man standing behind her, more than this whole situation. "I made a promise once, that I wouldn't stop until all of you are dead or captured. I will hold to that."

"After Sergeant Barnes fell from that train, yes, I know," Synthia says. When Steve frowns, wondering, like Tony, how she could possibly know, she smiles, "You have your weapons, I have mine." She taps the side of her head with one manicured finger. She hasn't moved her lips to speak, and Tony has the sudden, horrifying feeling that she is talking directly into his head. "Let's cut to the chase, shall we? This is about your Bucky. It's always been about him."

"Don't you dare say his name," Steve takes a menacing step forwards, radiating such dark, hostile anger it makes even Tony uneasy. Behind Synthia, the masked man flexes his arms, looking desperate for a fight.

"Bucky?" Synthia repeats, taunting him. "That is what this is about though. You can fool the world, Captain, you can even fool your friends, but you can't fool me. Everything you have ever done is about him. You wanted to join the Army to be with him; you allowed men to experiment on you purely on the hope the results would bring you to his side. You disobeyed your orders and marched into enemy territory to save his life, and when you saw what had been done to him you made vengeance for those wrongs a higher priority than his safety. And not just once, but three times!" She laughs, shaking her head in disbelief. "He was slipping away from you long before he fell from that train, and what did you do to save him?" She has uncrossed her ankles and stands upright, so much smaller than Steve is, but radiating a kind of menace and power that is more than a match for his strength. She leans towards him, her lips twisted into a derisive smile, "Nothing."

Steve is practically sharking beside him, and Tony moves quickly, stepping between him and Synthia before he snaps. She knows things she shouldn't know and she's far too calm about goading Steve into a rage. They don't know what she is capable of yet, but they do know she's Schmidt's daughter and that's more than enough to keep Tony cautious, even with the suit on.

"How many times did he need you to save him but you were too caught up with your own sanctimonious selfishness to actually help him?"

"You know nothing about--" Steve starts to yell, so pale and still trembling as he reigns his anger with what little self control he has left, but Synthia cuts him off, stepping closer to them.

"I know everything. I know about the factory, about Bavaria. I know about Paris, Steve. I know what you promised him that morning. I know he screamed your name long after he forgot his own, and I know he's spent these last three months sitting in your old apartment in Brooklyn, trying oh so hard to remember how to be the man you want him to be. Nice of your father to buy the building, don't you think?" She then asks Tony, who tenses immediately. He's still not told Steve about Howard. He still doesn't know how.

Steve goes completely still next to him, and misses the comment. "You know where he is?" He asks, an undercurrent of fear leaking into his voice that Tony completely understands. If Synthia knows where Bucky is, how the hell has he stayed safe this long?

"I know where he was," she nods, "I told you. I have my own weapons." She holds up a hand as Steve takes another step forward, willing to go through Tony if not around him, "Consider this an act of good faith. I have no interest in having him brought in and 'recalibrated' as I believe Lukin calls it, and you've made quite a nuisance of yourself. I'm willing to let that go - it is understandable given your situation. Let us draw a line under this now. You leave us alone, we leave you alone. You can return to your pathetic pining for one another. It will be just like the good old days. No HYDRA agent will attack any of you unprovoked, if you are willing to give me the same agreement. It is a good deal. You want peace, Captain Rogers, I feel it in your soul."

Steve stares at her for the longest time, and Tony wonders if maybe, perhaps, he is thinking about accepting her offer.

Then he starts to laugh again. "You're terrified, aren't you?" He says, something dark and dangerous in his eyes, "You're waiting for the day he realizes all of his pain is on you, and comes looking for some payback."

"We are not afraid of one man," Synthia scoffs. "If we wanted him dead--"

"Then why isn't he?" Steve asks, "If killing him would be so easy, why haven't you done it?"

"What if I gave you Lukin?" Synthia asks. "If I handed him over to you now, to do whatever you like? He was head of the program. Zola, unfortunately, is dead. You blew up what was left of him already. Karpov probably hurt your boy the most but again, he is also long in the ground..." she pauses and looks at Steve, who has gone very pale, smiling slowly, "Oh, you didn't know? Who do you think found him after the fall? Contained him until HYDRA had its grasp on SHIELD?"

Tony feels a chill run down his spine. He vaguely remembers his father telling him about Vasily Karpov, the young Soviet soldier who had assisted the Commandos with a mission against the Red Skull in 1944. But it can't be... It can't possibly be the same man--

"Why would Vasily help Zola? He hated HYDRA even more than we did," Steve says.

"For the same reason Howard Stark did of course," Synthia smiles, "Because it suited him."

Tony freezes, but there is no chance Steve didn't hear it this time. "Howard Stark helped HYDRA with the Winter Soldier," Steve repeats after a beat, flat and disbelieving.

"He paid for it," Synthia laughs, "That's quite some family legacy you have there, Anthony. Does it help knowing that hypocrisy is clearly a genetic trait?"

"He didn't." Steve says with utter certainty, ignoring her dig in a way Tony can't. "He would never--" Steve glances at Tony and he tries, god, he tries so hard to hide the truth from his expression.

But Steve's face falls. He looks like someone has just ripped the floor out from under him. Tony takes a step forward, trying to find some way of easing the sting of both Howard's betrayal and his own silence on the subject, but Steve takes a step back as if burned.

"Oh dear, dear," Synthia says, "I'm sorry you had to find out this way."

Steve-- Tony tries to think of something to say here that will make a difference, but Synthia beats him to it.

"If it makes you feel any better, your boy did kill both him and his wife. Of course, he didn't know it at the time, but all the same...."

Tony grits his teeth, desperately willing himself not to react, but he can't help it. Howard was his father. There is still a small part of him that loves him, that craves the things from him that he never got - that mourns his death and his mother's, and wants revenge on the people who did it.

Steve's expression shifts from betrayal to horror, and this time Tony doesn't try stop him from throwing the shield at her head. It flies right through her and ricochets off the wall behind her.

"What the-" Tony stares at her in horror.

"I take it that's a 'no deal', then?" She frowns, glancing back to the man still standing silently behind her. "We did try, remind me of that when I regret their deaths later."

Steve doesn't make it more than five steps before both she and the masked man behind her vanish into thin air. He stumbles, shocked, and glances around the now empty room, trying to find an enemy who might never have been there in the first place.

"What the hell?" Tony asks. "How the hell? What the hell? Is this magic? It is, isn't it? Have I mentioned that I hate magic? I hated it with Loki, I hated it with Harry Potter and I hate it now."

"We need to get out of here." Steve says grimly. He can't quite meet Tony's eyes, and for the life of him Tony doesn't know if it is because of what Howard did, or how he died.

"All in favor of that plan." Tony nods his head rapidly. They can shelve the deep and meaningful discussions for another time and place. When people vanish into thin air, bad things inevitably follow. "Shall we-"

He doesn't get to finish. The second they start to retreat out into the corridor they are met by a hail of gunfire that has appeared out of nowhere.

Steve brings up his shield in time to block the first round, and Tony locks on to six separate targets, eliminating them with ease. "Oh baby, I missed you." He coos to the suit, thinking how much easier it would have been to take down the London Cage if he'd had a little more fire power and a little more time. He'd have put a hole in Lukin's head for a start.

"Nat," Steve speaks into his mic on the off chance the line is active again, "how the hell did reinforcements get past you?" It isn't.

There is radio silence and they share a glance of worry. "Have we just fallen for the villain's monologue? Oh god, we have. We are the worst superheroes ever-" Tony babbles, impossibly freaked out by everything that is going on right now. He hates magic. He hates it. His head is screwed up enough without anyone adding their own mumbo jumbo into the mix.

"Focus, Tony!" Steve yells, taking cover a second after Tony fires a small rocket out into the hallway. He follows the blast through by hurling his shield out into the melee, catching it on the rebound.

"I am!" Tony yells back, slightly offended. "JARVIS is offline. All our communications are down and I'm not getting a reading on any other life signs, which makes no sense because hello, people are shooting at us! Again!"

Steve looks around grimly. "Can you make us an exit?"

"There is thirty feet of solid steel and concrete above our heads. We'd be faster going back the way we came."

Steve nods and they start to sprint down the corridor towards the elevator floor. Steve is several paces in front of him, and then suddenly he's not. Tony freezes in horror as he vanishes right before his eyes, then turns, looking up and down the corridor.

In the span of mere seconds, Steve has ended up right down the far end of the corridor, several hundred feet away from where they started.

"Tony!" Steve yells, racing towards him. "The elevator!"

Tony spins back around, half expecting a small army to be pouring out of the corridor.

There isn't.

There isn't a corridor at all.

"What the hell is going on here?" He yells in frustration.

"I don't know." Steve shakes his head. They turn back the way he has come from, forced now to take the only direction they can.

The whole building is a maze, but it's not one that has any infrastructure Tony can detect. It's like the walls just move themselves of their own free will. He tries bringing up the blueprints of the building manually, but there is nothing there. When he checks them with the other schematics he has of the area it gets even weirder, because there is physically no space for a building this size to be underground. It isn't simply that it shouldn't exist, but that it can't.

A body suddenly lurches out into the corridor, seemingly from nowhere. Tony shouts in surprise and blasts it back into the wall on instinct. It falls, and he can tell it was a man - maybe. His skin looks like it's melted onto his face.

"I swear to god, if HYDRA have actually created zombies I'm gonna-" He spins around to yell at Steve, but there is no sign of him at all. Tony is alone. "Steve? Steve! JARVIS?"

There is no answer from anyone. He's alone.

Or maybe not. He catches movement behind him and spins around, ready to take out yet another misshapen body that hurls itself towards him.

He doesn't have to. The man never reaches him, but suddenly drops to the floor.

"Oh my god!" Tony feels slightly light-headed as he looks at the knife sticking out of the man's back. "You have got to be fucking kidding me!" He spins around on his heel and meets Bucky's angry, steely gaze. He's not surprised that Bucky's managed to sneak up on him, not any more, but he is surprised to see him here of all places. "What the fuck?" He yells, flailing his arms a little. "Why are you here?"

Bucky looks about as pissed off as Tony has ever seen him - and he still remembers the carnage from the last time they were in London together. "Because you and Steve don't have half a fucking brain between the both of you." Bucky says sourly.

Tony's taken aback both by his tone and the syntax of his words. There's more eloquence than he's used to hearing from the usually monosyllabic Barnes, and it's almost as startling as his sudden appearance.

"That's not true!" He finds himself saying defensively. "We've got plenty of brain!"

“Then explain to me why the fuck you came here.” Bucky demands. “This is where HYDRA sends things to die,” he snarls, forcibly holding Tony in place when he tries to make a run for it. “You just walked into their slice of Hell without a backup plan!”

“How did you know we were here?” Tony asks, looking Bucky up and down. He’s wearing the same combat outfit he’d worn in D.C, which suggests to Tony he’d hidden it someplace safe while on the run from Steve, because he sure as hell hadn’t been wearing it when he’d left in the Jaguar. He’s not carrying the same level of weaponry as he had been then, but Tony can still spot three guns and as many knives on him, and that’s not including his poor, misappropriated kitchen knife. “Do you have an exit? This whole place is a maze and there is something really, really funky going on with the walls and-“

“It’s not real.” Bucky says firmly, suddenly grabbing Tony tighter by the arm and shaking him hard enough that his teeth rattle. “None of this is real. Tony. I need you to wake up.”

Tony points down to the body on the ground between them. “That looks pretty damn real!”

“He’s not real,” And Bucky suddenly sounds very gentle, understanding almost, as if he knows exactly what Tony is feeling right now. “I’m not real. All of this is in your head. Tony, please--”

“Why would my head imagine you?” Tony wants to know. “My head is smarter than that! My head knows Steve would rip it off!” He wonders if he’s losing his grip on reality. Then the man who says he isn’t real gives him a firm shake, and he knows he is.

“Because I’m trying to wake you up, you dumb fuck! How are you more stubborn than Steve?” Bucky demands in frustration.

Tony looks around. “Steve’s still here?”

“Yes! And he needs help.” Bucky says, and Tony finally looks at him, reads the panic in his eyes and hears the fear in his voice. “Please! You have to snap out of it!”

Suddenly the world flickers. The white walls and floor becomes filthy cement and broken glass. Bucky’s heavy body armor and weaponry becomes a bland gray hoodie and jeans, and instead of the hollow silence of the otherwise empty corridor he can hear the ring of Steve’s shield as it hits something heavy.

“Bucky?” Tony asks, his head pounding with confusion as the two worlds he is inhabiting try fight for dominance in his head.

Bucky glances away for a second, his whole face painted with distress, then he turns back to Tony desperately. “Come on!” He begs, still gripping his shoulders tight.

And the world slots back into place with a snap.

Nausea rolls in his gut and the suit’s head piece falls away in time for him to roll to his side and throw up his lunch.

JARVIS’s voice is suddenly ringing in his ears, relieved and reassuring as he continues to vomit. “I would avoid moving if I were you, sir. I’m detecting a serious neurological spike that could prove hazardous to your health.”

“No kidding,” he feels sick and shaky, not at ease within his own skin, and the thought that someone actually has the power to do this to him makes Tony want to take a long, hot shower.

Strong hands brace him and ease him over. Tony wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand just in time to see Bucky spring into action and launch himself across the open space.

Tony can finally see the fight he'd been able to distantly hear, and Bucky's right - Steve needs help. He is getting his ass kicked.

The masked man they had seen with Synthia - who Tony thought might or might not have been anything more than a figment of her mental manipulation - is slamming his hand into Steve's face over and over with the kind of malicious glee that suggests this is far more personal to him than it is to Steve.

Steve blocks most of them, but he looks as sick and unsteady as Tony feels and his attacker clearly got the upper hand early on in the fight.

Across the room, Bucky reaches them. He grabs a hold of the man trying to beat Steve's skull in and flings him across the room with his metal arm.

The shock of it doesn't last long, and he rolls, springing back up into a fighting stance and squaring off against Bucky, who is channeling every inch of menace he'd projected as the Winter Soldier.

Tony struggles to his feet, makes to follow Bucky and help Steve, but falls to one knee, his legs unable to support him.

He thinks he is going to be sick again, but isn't, and when he stumbles back to his feet he is this time braced by the sudden appearance of Natasha.

"I thought this wasn't real!" Tony protests weakly, waving his arm in the direction of the unfolding fight. Bucky and the masked man continue to stare at one another, weighing, assessing. Tony has no idea who is going to make the first move, only that he sure as hell wouldn't be dumb enough to try anything with Bucky looking the way he currently is.

"Easy," Natasha says, grabbing hold of his arm as he sways on the spot. Christ, he feels sick. "I got you, you're okay."

"Wha-what happened?" He can't stop shaking, he can't stop feeling like he needs to curl up in a ball and hide away from the world. "Where is Schmidt? Who the hell is that guy? Why do I want to puke up a lung?"

"Schmidt's gone," Natasha says darkly, "she got the jump on me, I'm sorry." Her eyes are bright with self recrimination, and it's then that he spots the vicious looking bruise on her head. It's not broken the skin, but it probably had rendered her unconscious. Matched with the blood soaking through the leg of her jumpsuit she looks considerably the worse for wear.

"She didn't jedi mind trick you?" He asks, wondering how she is staying upright.

"Wouldn't work on me," she says, shouldering more of his weight, "I'm trained for it."

That says far, far more about her past before SHIELD than Tony thinks he's ever heard from her. Synthia's mind tricks shouldn't even be possible - she's human, humans don't have that kind of power - and for Natasha to not only know of their existence, but to be trained against them...

He thinks of Bucky as well, and how he'd not been affected, thinks of the understanding and sympathy in his face when he'd tried talking Tony around.

Fucking HYDRA.

Across the room, the man in the mask thinks better of taking Bucky one on one. He sneers, the skull of his face twisting up in an ugly grimace, a rictus of death. "This isn't over, Rogers," he says.

"Brock?" Steve chokes. He's trying to climb to his feet and seems to be having as much trouble with his equilibrium as Tony is. Tony stares at Rumlow in shock, trying to match this masked monster to the man he'd seen drugged to his gills in that hospital bed in DC.

"Name's Crossbones now, and we're not done." Rumlow tips his head in a mocking salute, then races away into the darkness.

There's a moment when Bucky looks like he is going to go after him, then Steve groans and the dark, haunted look vanishes from Bucky's face, only to be replaced by anguished worry.

Bucky drops to his side, his hands framing Steve's face as he checks him for a concussion.

"Bucky?" Steve breathes, reaching up to touch his cheek, desperate to believe him real.

"I'm here," Bucky says quietly.

"You came," Steve says brokenly, "I thought you-"

"Yeah, well you always get yourself into the worst shit when I'm not around," Bucky looks briefly like he wants to lean into Steve's touch, but he doesn't. He pulls back, rocks on to his heels and then pulls Steve to his feet. When Steve wobbles, Bucky gets under him, wraps Steve's arms over his shoulder and takes his weight, like Natasha has done with Tony.

"You found us." Steve breathes, and it looks like Bucky has to try desperately not to lean into his touch.

"I've always known where you are," he admits softly. Tony wonders if Bucky has been obsessively checking their whereabouts as they have been adamantly not checking his. "We really need to talk about these bright ideas of yours."

Despite looking like someone used his face as a piñata, Steve can't stop the smile that stretches his lips as Bucky helps him limp over to join Natasha and Tony.

"We need to get out of here," Natasha says, nodding to Bucky. "Schmidt's gone but there's no guarantee she won't come back and you guys are not up to a repeat performance, believe me."

"How could she even do that?" Steve asks, swaying violently against Bucky's side.

"The Red Skull did all kinds of things with the Tesseract," Bucky points out slowly. Tony wonders if Steve can spot the way Bucky and Natasha are suddenly doing a damn fine job of not looking at each other. He's missing something here, he's sure of it.

Well, that or some crazy psycho just messed around with his head and he can't tell up from down... paranoia is more than likely a side effect.

"Yeah, but he never had those kind of powers," Steve says.

"Tony's place in the city has been compromised," Bucky says gently, ignoring Steve's segue. "It won't be safe. We need to go to ground."

"Thor," Steve says, "we go to Thor." Together they start limping through the factory and out into the crisp night air.

“Jane’s gonna kill us,” Tony points out, but he doesn’t argue. They need some place safe. He still feels like he wants to puke up his internal organs and they desperately need to regroup.

If HYDRA have someone with that kind of juice at their disposal - and they are only now choosing to reveal themselves - then it most likely means they are gearing up for a fight far beyond what they have already experienced. Super soldiers and heroes are one thing, but Schmidt is in a whole other league. They need a plan, they need...

He needs to sleep.

“What the hell is she?” He asks tiredly.

“A miracle,” Bucky says from Steve’s other side, “Or a monster.”

“I vote monster. I feel...” He can’t finish that sentence, but by the look Bucky gives him, he understands exactly how Tony feels, which is all the confirmation Tony needs to know Bucky has been exposed to her before.

“She’s neither,” Natasha says softly. Tony glances down at her, stunned at the way she turns her face from him. It almost looks like she is ashamed.

“Nat?” Steve encourages her gently. She looks up at him, wide eyed and suddenly very young, and Tony gets the feeling that right now Steve is the only person who can convince her to open up. He knows she respects Steve in a way she does very few people. He’ll even go out on a limb and say that she, like so many others, craves his approval - though she’ll likely kill before admitting as much.

“She trained me. Before I joined SHIELD. I didn’t know she was HYDRA. I didn’t know she was the Red Skull’s daughter. Not at the time, anyway.”

“She trained you?” Steve echoes, “How old were you?”

“I don’t know. Young,” Natasha admits, helping Tony keep his footing as they exit through the broken gates. “But that’s why I can resist her telepathy. She trained me to.”

Telepathy. There’s an actual goddamn word for what she can do and it’s right out of a bad sci-fi.

“What about you?” Tony asks Bucky, who is staring at Natasha like he’s seeing her in a whole new light. “She train you as well?”

“No, I don't think so,” Bucky shakes his head slowly, “I think I trained her.”

“That’s terrifying,” Tony says, horrified, “we really don’t know anything about HYDRA at all, do we?” He feels the weight of the evening’s revelations rest heavy on his shoulders as they all limp towards Tony’s car.

They’d thought that their biggest problem was corruption and the likes of Alexander Pierce, or sadists and Lukin’s ilk. Human evils on a large scale. That is what they have been gearing up to fight.

The thought that they could be so, so wrong about their enemy - again - is too terrifying to contemplate.

“We will,” Steve says firmly, “We’ll figure this out as a team,” he’s careful to look at Natasha when he says that, making it clear that her confession means nothing to him in the grand scheme of

things. Tony gives her a gentle little squeeze and she smiles up at him, honest and grateful. She's one of them, past be damned. It's a lesson that has taken a long time to hold with her, and Tony fears it will take even longer with Bucky.

"Are you okay?" Steve seems unconcerned with his own mental health, or the fact that some guy with a skull for a face just beat the crap out of him. He looks down at Bucky like he's torn between tears of joy and sadness.

Tony can't help the pride he feels when Bucky looks back without flinching. "I'm fine," Bucky says, "Better than you anyway."

"I had him on the ropes," Steve says absently, then he freezes, looking away sharply with agony in his expression.

Tony doesn't know what Steve is expecting from Bucky. He doesn't know what any of them can expect really. Bucky came to save them, save Steve, and he seems so much more stable than the last time they saw him, but Tony's not stupid, not naive.

Things aren't okay. Hell, given the night's revelations they are probably the furthest from okay they could be.

But Bucky looks back up at Steve, not smiling, not even close, but not afraid either.

And when he says, "Yeah, I know you did," Steve lights up like the fourth of July.

There's a sudden spark between them, something he's only glimpsed flashes of in the past but now seems to grow stronger and brighter. He can see it in the way Bucky holds Steve tightly against him, in the surety of his footing and the slow birth of something soft and human in his eyes. Something has changed. Or maybe it has just changed back.

It's not okay. It's not a magic glue.

But it's a start.

EPILOGUE

Jane is, as Steve expected, not all that pleased to see them. Steve can understand why. They all look a mess. It's not because she doesn't like them, far from it, but because four superheroes in her parent's small, cosy flat is a recipe for disaster. Steve promises to behave and be careful and Tony's too busy looking like he wants to throw up to make much of a comment.

Steve feels bad for him - he'd felt pretty awful himself until his body burned through whatever it was Schmidt had done to him. It was all in his mind, he knows, but the brain gives off some pretty powerful chemicals when it is being messed with and he knows they are to blame for the way Tony still looks green around the edges.

He lets Thor fuss over both him and Bucky for a moment before deflecting him over to Tony and Natasha.

He still has his arm over Bucky's shoulder. He feels more steady on his feet and probably doesn't need the support, but having him close and safe is more of a comfort than he could ever have

imagined.

But he can't keep up the pretense here, not when there are places to sit, and not when refusing to do so would be taking advantage of Bucky's concern.

Steve eases himself away and tries not to cringe at the startled look on Bucky's face when there is suddenly distance between them.

Steve isn't sure he's real. Schmidt had been in his head, making him see and feel and think whatever she liked, then out of nowhere came Bucky, calling him back from that empty white space like a siren. Opening his eyes to Bucky's face only inches from his own had almost been as painful as the fallout from Schmidt's manipulations.

It is not easier now, even an hour or more later. Bucky stays close, allowing Steve into his personal space in a way that makes it so easy to pretend things are the way they once were. He and Bucky have never really had much in the way of boundaries when it comes to their own space, and he'd been so clingy after all that had happened in D.C. Now, sounding so much more like his old self than he has since Steve saw him on that bridge, it's so painfully easy to pretend.

But as much as he wants to, he can't. He's made that mistake in the past. He's let Bucky pretend everything is okay when it's been so far from the truth - he's let his own misguided beliefs cloud his judgement and make him stupid.

Steve won't, he *can't* make that mistake again. Bucky needs him. He might not know how, even Steve doesn't know what it is Bucky needs from him, but he knows he'll give him anything, everything. Whatever it takes for him to be okay, even if that means letting him walk away again.

Thor flashes Bucky a beaming smile as he bounds over and shows them to the small office space and guest bedroom, pointing out the shower which he proclaims to be the greatest in Midgard, and welcoming them both to Jane's home before promising them their privacy will not be disturbed.

Steve catches sight of Tony slumped on the couch in the sitting room, whiskey in one hand and his cell phone in the other as he reports back to Barton, Sam, Bruce and Pepper in New York, makes plans for them to regroup. Steve knows he should be involved in planning their next step, but he can't draw his focus away from Bucky for fear that he'll vanish again.

The door closes and then, suddenly, they are alone, for the first time since the night Bucky left what now they call Avengers Tower, and Steve isn't sure if he should be panicking or not. The last time they've been alone together he'd done a spectacular job of messing everything up and he's so afraid of repeating the same mistakes.

Is it even wise to leave Bucky alone with him? Can he be trusted with someone he's already taken advantage of, even unknowingly?

Bucky looks...well, he still looks gaunt and hollow, his eyes shadowed by tiredness and pain, but he doesn't look any worse than he did when he left New York and that has been Steve's biggest fear. His hair is a little longer, his clothes ill fitting and shapeless, but he's still Bucky, and looking at him is still like looking up at the stars on a cloudless night.

Steve swallows back his fears, and his tears with them, and summons a smile. "I had him on the ropes," he says again, because Bucky remembering that makes his heart swell with hope.

"I know. I remember-" Bucky says softly, "most things. From before. After's more... messy?" He tries, his mouth pulled down into a frown.

“The number of times they messed with your head,” Steve says gently, “That’s not surprising.”

“I get bits and pieces, sometimes,” Bucky admits with a small nod. “People, faces.” He laughs, suddenly bitter and cold like the winter they named him for, “I killed the president, you know? Actually, I killed several presidents.” He looks up at Steve with eyes that hold both a challenge and a plea. It’s the eye contact, more than anything, which gives Steve hope. Bucky had not made eye contact with Lukin or any of the HYDRA operatives who abused him while he was their prisoner. “I killed Stark.”

Steve has to physically force himself not to flinch at that for so many reasons, not least of which is Tony. Steve’s not stupid: Tony hadn’t been shocked or surprised when Synthia had dropped that little bombshell on them, which means he had to have known, and has chosen to keep the knowledge from Steve. There’s a lot he and Tony need to talk about, but now, always, Bucky has to be his priority.

“That wasn’t-“

“Don’t say it wasn’t me!” Bucky snaps, shying away from Steve when he tries to reach out and touch him. “Don’t say that!” He looks brittle, fragile, like the wrong words here will do more damage to his soul than seventy years worth of torment and torture.

There was a time when Steve had been so good at this, at knowing what to say and when to say it, at knowing how to get under Bucky’s skin and soothe the hurts that lay hidden from sight.

That was before the war. After he’d found Bucky strapped to that table in Austria everything had changed. The lighthearted, happy, joyful boy he’d known had slowly faded away, replaced by a serious, unsmiling, haunted man Steve had been helpless to save over and over again.

Synthia had been right - Bucky had been slipping away from him long before he fell, and he’d done nothing to stop it happening.

If he’d been braver, perhaps, less oblivious...

Everyone makes mistakes, Steve knows that, but have any mistakes ever had such horrific consequences as his?

He doesn’t know how to even start fixing them, just that he has to try.

“I wasn’t gonna,” Steve swears, “It was you, your hands, your body, but Bucky, you had no control over it. They made you.” He wishes he could say that making Bucky kill was the worst thing HYDRA had done to him, but he knows it’s not even close to the truth.

“That’s not an excuse, Steve!” Bucky protests, blaming himself as only Bucky ever could, “It’s not...” He has to break off as his breathing grows heavier and his hands start to tremble. He’s toeing the line of a panic attack and that’s the last thing Steve wants to trigger. He’d been doing so well and Steve refuses to be the cause of a relapse.

“Hey, no, it’s okay. We don’t have to talk about this now.” He holds up his hands, tries to make himself look unthreatening. It might work with anyone but Bucky, because it’s not Steve’s physical presence that is agitating him.

Bucky lets out a heavy breath and drops down onto the wooden chair by the desk. “Since when do you not want to talk? You always want to talk,” he says, rather petulantly. It makes Steve smile sadly. That’s true, at least with Bucky. How many fights have they had because Steve doesn’t know how to quit?

“Guess I learned my lesson,” Steve says gently as he moves in closer.

“Better late than never,” Bucky sighs. He rests his head on his hand, his elbow propped up on the desk. He looks as exhausted as Steve feels and it’s killing Steve not to just walk over there and wrap his arms around him, to hold him close and let him know he’s not alone. Even if the gesture were welcome, he knows it won’t actually bring Bucky the comfort Steve might wish. Too many associations of Lukin, too many innocent comforts perverted by a cruel man and his sick desires. Steve hates him for that - hates him from taking away the best comfort he knows how to give.

Unless...

Unless...

Keeping his movements slow, Steve crosses the small room until he’s level with the chair Bucky is sitting on. Bucky glances up, his jaw hard and tense but his eyes filled with vulnerabilities. He watches Steve with a resigned sort of patience that makes him feel sick, then his mouth opens in shock when Steve lowers himself onto his knees.

He’s a big guy, he can’t change that, but he tries to take up as little space as possible when he curls up on the ground.

Lukin had always maintained his dominance with Bucky. When he held him or stroked his hair, he made Bucky come to him for comfort, he kept the power of their relationship firmly in hand.

Steve has no such desire. He’ll give Bucky anything and everything he asks for, even the things that make him bleed on the inside.

Slowly, cautiously, he rests his head on Bucky’s thigh and wraps his arm around his waist.

He feels Bucky freeze and his heart sinks, but a moment later there is a brush of fingers against the back of his neck. It tickles in its hesitancy, but he says nothing as Bucky works up the nerve to press his hand to Steve’s neck. The metal is cool, but not cold, and for a fraction of a second, Steve’s brain tells him how goddamn stupid he is to put himself in such a vulnerable position with a man who has tried to kill him twice now. He shoves the thought aside. This is Bucky, and Bucky has always made him a little stupid.

Hell, sometimes a lot stupid.

The hesitant touch to his neck becomes a soft, careful stroke of fingers, so light that sometimes Steve can’t feel it at all. Bucky’s being so careful not to hurt him, and Steve can feel Bucky’s breathing soften and even out, the steady expand and contraction of his ribs almost as soothing as the warmth of his thigh beneath Steve’s cheek.

Bucky is taking comfort from this, he’s leaning into Steve’s arms, he is growing more daring. Steve closes his eyes in relief and drops an absent kiss to Bucky’s leg.

Then he freezes. Too much. Too intimate. Too-

“Do you remember that morning?” Bucky’s voice is so soft Steve has to strain to hear it.

Yes. Of course. How could he forget? That morning has haunted him for years.

He doesn’t say that, not willing to assume. “Which one?” He murmurs.

“*That morning,*” Bucky says.

“Oh.”

“Do you remember it?”

“Yes,” Steve breathes. He remembers every second of *that* morning. Sometimes he replays it over and over in his head until he’s convinced he can change the outcome.

Until he saw Bucky again in D.C. the first thing Steve had thought of in the mornings, and the last thing he’d thought of at night, had been the look on Bucky’s face *that* morning.

“I wish...I wish I’d let you kiss me,” Bucky confesses.

Steve’s eyes fill with tears. He remembers the rough pad of Bucky’s fingertips as they curled over his lips, stopping what would have been their first - last - kiss. *If we do this now, we’ll never stop.* He remembers the way the sunshine tipped snow had reflected back at him from Bucky’s eyes, his mouth turned up into a smile and his heartbeat rapid beneath Steve’s fingers “Me too.” That morning haunts him, maybe not for the reasons Bucky thinks it does, but it haunts him none the less.

And if...if Steve had kissed him that morning, only hours before Bucky slipped from his grasp and fell into hell, they’d have had that fleeting spark of perfect happiness they both so desperately craved. Instead they had the hollowness of a moment unfulfilled and the taint of a kiss that was clouded by confusion and hurt.

“You remember?” Bucky asks him.

“I remember.”

“Do you think about it a lot?”

Only in the seconds he’s not thinking about all the ways he has failed Bucky. “Yeah. Do you?” Of all the memories he wishes Bucky to recover, this one is perhaps the most precious.

“I remember.” Bucky says, “I forgot but...I remember now.”

Tears leak from the corners of Steve’s eyes to dampen the fabric of Bucky’s pants. The fingers on his neck move up to his hair, stroking gently. “Bucky-“

“You told me you loved me. You told me I was everything. That I was perfect.” Bucky’s voice is small. Steve’s back has already started to ache from the angle he’s twisted himself into, but he’s not moving for anything. He presses another kiss to Bucky’s leg.

“I do,” he breathes, “you are.”

“Not any more,” Bucky says, broken and hollow...and angry. “I’m not...I’m not him. He’s dead, you understand that? The man you loved is dead and cold in the ground.”

Steve can’t stand to hear him talk like that, can’t stand to not see his face. He loosens his arm around Bucky’s waist and twists, until he is kneeling between Bucky’s legs, his arms braced on the edges of the chair and he can look up and see the bitterness and hurt in Bucky’s eyes as well as he hears it in his voice. Bucky’s hand falls from Steve’s back to rest on his side.

“Look at me Buck, please,” Steve begs, reaching up to brush aside the long hair that falls into his face and hides his expression. “You didn’t die, you survived. You remember that morning, yes?” Bucky nods miserably. “I told you I loved you, but you were the one who had the guts to tell me

first. You were the one who stopped us dancing around each other like idiots. You were the brave one. You've *always* been the brave one."

"You don't know--"

"I know *you*. I love *you*," Steve says stubbornly. "Nothing can ever change that." They've lost so many years together because they could never find the right words. Steve refuses to let that happen again. Once he might have been afraid to be so bold, now he'll shout it from the rooftops if it helps.

"You love *him*. I'm not him, Steve. I've tried to be but--" Bucky looks down at his hands as his metal fingers fiddle with the fabric of his pants. "I'm something else. I don't know what."

Steve takes a breath and thinks very carefully about the next words out of his mouth. There's no chance of Bucky accepting the truth right now - that he's blameless in all this, that they haven't taken everything from him that made him who he was - there probably won't be for some time. His wounds run too deep, the glass edges of his trauma still brittle and sharp.

"You're not the man I knew before you fell. *He* wasn't the man I knew, before you left for England," Steve says earnestly, keeping eye contact and trying to pour everything he's been thinking about these past months, hell, years even, all the things he's wished he'd said, all the things he's wished he'd done, or not done, "Thing is Buck, I'm not the same guy either. I love the you that walked around our apartment in the summer wearing nothing but your suspenders while you sang along to the wireless. I love the you who gave me crap on a daily basis during the war, but who beat the shit outta any guy who looked wrong in my direction. I love the you who had no reason to save me but did, who apparently did unspeakable things with Tony's kitchen knives and intimidated the Vice Regent of Asgard into helping find me. I love the you who has been giving Tony hell the last three months over whether or not I'm wearing a thick enough sweater." He can't help but smile over that one, remembering all too clearly Tony's perplexed face when he passed on the message.

Bucky's throat bobs as he forces back the emotions welling in his eyes. Steve can't stand the idea of making him cry but Bucky needs to hear this - Steve can't ever risk him thinking that he, the person he is right this very second, is not loved down to the last atom of his being.

"How?" He asks, broken and hurt.

Steve hesitates before responding with a question of his own, "What do you mean?" He asks, wanting to be certain of Bucky's question before he answers.

Bucky shakes his head hopelessly, but that doesn't seem to be a no. "What I did. What I am."

Steve feels his shoulders drop, but he finds it easy to smile up at Bucky, full of fondness and certainty. "I don't know," he admits, "I've never known why I love you, just that I always have. I've lived in a world without you in it, Buck, and it's a cold, dark place."

Bucky nods, understanding on a far more literal plane what it means to be isolated and kept out of the light. "So what do we do now?"

"Anything you want," Steve says, "Anything at all. We can go anywhere, do anything. We can stay in this room for the next five years. You... you can leave, on your own, if you want. *Anything*."

"Think your friends might get upset if we do that." Bucky says, and there's just enough hint of dry humor beneath the low pain in his voice to make Steve's heart soar. 'We'. He said 'we'. That he

ignores the idea of going on alone is enough to bring tears to his eyes once more. “You mean it though?”

“That we could stay?”

“That we could go.”

“Anywhere.” Steve promises him.

“You’d just hang up the shield? Leave it behind?”

Steve doesn’t have to think, he doesn’t hesitate for a second. “Yes,” he says.

Bucky shakes his head in despair, “You’re Captain America.”

“I’m just Steve,” Steve disagrees, “Your Steve. Just a kid from Brooklyn. I don’t need Captain America.”

“Maybe I do?” Bucky whispers brokenly. “I always believed in you, even before the rest of the world did.”

Steve smiles, his eyes full of tears, “I know. That’s the only reason I could ever do what I did. *You’re* the reason.”

“I don’t want to run.” Bucky confesses. He curls his fingers around Steve’s and holds on tight. Steve raises his knuckles to his lips and gently kisses them, the metal cool beneath his lips.

“What do you want?” He asks, willing to give him anything.

To his horror, angry tears finally spill from Bucky’s eyes. “I want them to pay. I want...I want-“ but he can’t put in to words what he feels, and Steve can hardly blame him.

“Then they’ll pay,” he promises reverently, brushing away a tear with his thumb. “All of them. We’ll tear the whole goddamn system to the ground. We’ll make them regret the day they ever touched you.”

“You’re supposed to be better than me,” Bucky closes his eyes and leans into Steve’s hand. His lashes are dark against his pale cheeks. Steve can’t recall the hours he’s spent studying Bucky’s face, trying to memorize the contours and lines of him, to commit to memory what he was often so afraid to put to paper.

Steve can look past the horror of what they have done to his arm, he can pretend the multitudes of scars beneath Bucky’s clothing doesn’t render him cold with fury and anguish, but he can’t pretend that a part of his soul doesn’t burn for vengeance when he looks at Bucky’s face and see the enormity of what he has suffered reflected back in the emptiness of his eyes.

For that look, Steve wouldn’t hang up his shield so much as forge it into a new weapon, one designed with the single purpose of revenge.

“I’m not better than you,” Steve tells him, kneeling higher now, letting Bucky lean against him. His chest feels lighter now the weight of him is safe in Steve’s arms. “I’ve never been better than you, Buck, but I am better *with* you.”

“You’re a punk, you know that, Rogers?” Bucky says quietly.

“I’ve been told,” Steve says with a small smile. “Can’t believe you put up with me, half the time.”

“Someone’s gotta,” Bucky whispers.

Synthia was right about something else - everything Steve has ever done has been for Bucky - but she failed to acknowledge that the same has to said for Bucky as well.

They need each other. They complete each other.

And now they are together again, there is no power in existence that Steve will allow to come between them.

Bucky is home after so many years. They both are.

Chapter End Notes

So there we go! The end, for now! Like I said, a sequel will be coming, but first PREQUEL! I have far too many Howling Commando Era feels. I mean, who doesn't want an epically long fic about the two idiots who fail to communicate at every given moment and the poor, frustrated folk around them? :P
See you soon! xxxx

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